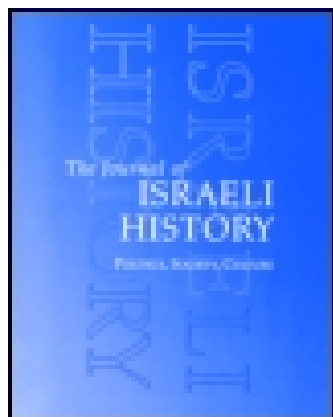


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Nitza Ben-Dov ^a

^a Assistant Professor in the Department of Hebrew and Comparative Literature, Haifa University

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The Raven's Message of Return: S.Y. Agnon and the Zionist Dream

Nitza Ben-Dov

IN 1907, when he was nineteen years old, Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes — the future Agnon — left his home in Buczacz, Galicia, and went to live in Palestine. Several years later, in 1913, he went to Germany and remained there for a decade, only to uproot himself yet again in 1924 and return to Palestine — this time, permanently.

In contrast to other young men whose wanderlust sprang from adventurism, rebellion, or an impatient desire to see the world, Agnon was responding to a call when he left Galicia. Imbued with the Zionist idea then pervading the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, Agnon justified his departure from his family on ideological grounds — as an ascent from home to homeland. Yet he left the Promised Land he had intended to make his own. Ideology had, at least temporarily, failed him; the port of call to which he had attached his youthful hopes proved disenchanting, and he sought a haven elsewhere — in Germany. But he did not settle there, because the Zionist idea ultimately overpowered him. Wiser, more experienced, and, above all, having learned the gentle art of compromise and reconciliation, Agnon returned to build his family and career.

The cycle of Agnon's biography — immigration to Israel, emigration, and return — is a case study in a maturational process that knows infinite human variety. Its essence, however, is constant: the collision of naive, youthful dreams with harsh realities. The resulting disappointment, almost inevitable, breeds rejection of dreams and estrangement from ideals — until, for some, there is the experience of return tempered by reality, an acceptance of life's more limited possibilities. So with Agnon's Zionism. He first journeyed to Palestine as an impassioned young man whose private yearnings merged with the national aspirations of his generation. Indeed, he never repudiated the Zionist idea, even as he left Palestine. But the seriousness and endurance of his youthful idealism was demonstrated only with his return to those ideals as a mature adult.

It is not surprising that Agnon, a writer of such a powerfully ideological *Gestalt*, filtered his Zionist views into his works. For example, the novel *Temol shilshom* ("Only Yesterday," 1945) is exclusively concerned with the protagonist's immigration to Palestine and his assimilation into the country. Despite the novel's unmistakably autobiographical overtones, it is not only

about the experience of a lone individual. It is also a panoramic work that documents the history of an entire generation: that of the Second Aliyah. Zionism, as an ideal and as a reality, is also discussed in other works such as "Binarenu uvizkenenu" ("Young and Old Together," 1920), in which Agnon harshly criticizes Zionist organizations in the Diaspora for wasting their time on idle talk. Even in a psychological novel such as *A Simple Story* (1935), in which external events are subordinated to the individual's inner life, Zionism plays an important role. Hirshl, the protagonist, though "not a Zionist," nevertheless attends the meetings of a Zionist fraternity because there he can listen to poetry, music, and songs of love for Zion, which reach a part of his soul that suffocates in the joyless atmosphere of his bourgeois home. Going beyond this emotional attraction to Zionism, *A Simple Story* also voices some concrete Zionist concepts, emphasizing "that an entire people could not subsist on buying and selling, and that Jews must be made to return to tilling the land."¹

The vague, unexplained attraction to Zionism on the part of Agnon's protagonists on the one hand, and the articulation of clear Zionist concepts on the other, permeate Agnon's works, but any attempt to extrapolate a systematic Zionist world view from these elements is doomed to failure. The ambiguity of his fiction and its infinite suggestiveness preclude any such schematization based on a "Zionist leitmotif." Moreover, Agnon did not regard literature as a propaganda tool for social reform in the real world; it was for him a vehicle through which to express human doubts and fears. Social reform, if it came to pass, would be an outgrowth of the internal worlds of individuals — the fruit of their education and life experience, of their gradual realization that they always have to choose between two imperfect ways.

If we wish to plumb the depths of Agnon's Zionism, we do best to look to his more mature work. Although Agnon returned to Palestine in the 1920s, he gave this return its belated literary expression in 1952, when he published *Ad hena* ("Thus Far"), after having lived in Israel for twenty-eight years. After the passage of so much time Agnon could probe in retrospect the soundness and viability of values which, earlier, had been founded upon mere speculation. As this article will try to show, with the writing of *Ad hena*, Agnon gave his understanding of Zionism its most subtle literary expression.²

Compared with the earlier works, *Ad hena* can scarcely be considered "Zionist." It seems primarily to relate the bizarre experiences of Shmuel

1 S.Y. Agnon, *A Simple Story*, trans. Hillel Halkin, New York, 1985, p. 95.

2 S.Y. Agnon, *Ad hena* (Hebrew), vol. 7 of *The Complete Works of S.Y. Agnon*, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1977. *Ad hena*, a short novel, was first published in 1952 and has never been translated into English.

Yosef, the narrator and hero, in Germany during World War I. Shmuel is like all of Agnon's heroes, both inside and outside the land of Israel: rootless, detached, and lonely. Transience, instability, and the ceaseless quest for a state of equilibrium are such permanent features of his life that he slowly begins to realize that he is a stranger to himself as well; not only is he a voluntary expatriate but he also floats in the limbo of psychological exile.³ But how can the anguish of internal exile or self-alienation be cured by Zionism, which ostensibly provides a strictly geographic — that is, external — solution? For Shmuel (like Agnon, his creator) has already lived in Palestine and left it. Malkah, one of his cousins and a perceptive secondary character, remarks to him: "You already lived in Israel, so why did you leave? Could it be for the same reason that causes everyone to be dissatisfied, wherever they are?"⁴

Thus Agnon, who believed that human nature is the primary moving force in history, does not shy away from examining Zionism from a psychological perspective. Two self-confessed Zionists, Shmuel and his cousin Malkah, who find themselves in exile in the midst of war-torn Germany, prove that the unfathomable desires of the heart are more powerful than any historical-ideological movement. The twisted knot which connects the psychology of the individual to global events is the main theme of the novel *Ad hena*.

Malkah marries an educated young man, a Hebrew-speaking Zionist, the son of a rural family in Polish Galicia. She accompanies him to his village and together they decide to "ascend" to the land of Israel and buy a plot of land "so as to work it and guard it,"⁵ a phrase that recalls Genesis 2:15, when God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden so that he might work the land and protect it. Even though both Malkah and her husband are eager to live the Zionist dream, and even though both are Hebrew speakers who have worked the land even prior to their scheduled ascent, certain "events occurred" (Shmuel claims he does not know precisely "what they are") which prevent them from acting on their good intentions. Instead of emigrating to till the land in Palestine, the young couple leaves for Germany and winds up buying a chicken-coop factory in the village of Lunenfeld, near Leipzig. When World War I breaks out, Malkah's husband and their son are called to duty, leaving her in the remote village without friends or family. It is just then, at the height of the war, that Shmuel unexpectedly visits Malkah. She reveals her doubts about Zionism to her guest in a scene that typifies Agnon's

3 For a more detailed analysis of the theme of self-alienation, see my article, "Dreams and Human Destiny in *Ad hena*," *Prooftexts* 7 (January 1987), p. 53–63.

4 Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 42.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

method of advancing through the “other person” his protagonists’ subconscious quest for self-awareness:

I can't explain it. Before, when I lived in Galicia, I longed to live in Germany, and now that I'm in Germany, I wish I were in Galicia. Could it be because, no matter where we are, the grass is always greener on the other side? You mustn't think me disloyal if I say that perhaps that's what Zionism is all about too. You know I'd be ready to cut my hair and sell it for the privilege of living in Israel. Yet there are times when in my heart I'm tempted to believe that that's what Zionism is really about. On the contrary, tell me “Malkah, you're wrong.” My husband and I agreed that with God's help, if we emerged in peace from the war, we'd leave for the Promised Land. You already lived in Israel, so why did you leave? Could it be for the same reason that causes everyone to be dissatisfied, wherever they are? You can tell me the truth — I'm not afraid of it. But I see this conversation is unpleasant for you, so let's talk about something else.⁶

For Shmuel, Malkah's candid and perceptive words are “unpleasant” because indirectly, by berating herself, she has expressed his own secret doubts as well. From her monologue it becomes clear that the nameless “events” preventing her and her husband from ascending to the Land of Israel were not beyond their control. Their plans still remain unfulfilled because Malkah chose, when the time came, to live in Germany. Now that she lives in Germany, she misses her home — in Galicia. Shmuel too is dissatisfied, as attested by his departure from the same land that inhabits both their dreams. Seeing all this soberly, Malkah begins to wonder if the source of Zionism is not a more pervasive, congenital restlessness, a wanderlust rooted in the soul (especially that of a Jew), a vague longing to begin life anew in other places. Though Malkah almost begs Shmuel, a seasoned traveler, to tell her she is “wrong,” he does not comply, for he is unwilling to pursue a painful subject that is no less personal than national. His silence on the matter is a tacit sign of agreement.

The restlessness of Agnon's protagonists — such as Shmuel and Malkah in *Ad hena* — and their unshakable feelings of guilt are a thematic focus in much of the author's early work. But then, in his impressionable and romantic years, Agnon's raw identification with the heroes of his own making prevented him from dispassionately analyzing the reason for their disquiet.⁷

6 Ibid., p. 42.

7 About Agnon's sentimental writings, where, long before he began to contemplate the nature of things from ironic or philosophic distance (as he would, for example, in *Ad hena*), he employed a lyrical style to describe his protagonists' ennui, see Gershon Shaked, *The Narrative Art of S.Y. Agnon* (Hebrew), Tel-Aviv, 1976, p. 30–42.

Another factor that prevented Agnon from analyzing his characters directly was his distinctive narrative artistry, a constant throughout his career. His evasive way of storytelling reflects his protagonists' enormous capacity for self-deception and evasion. This structural replication of the circuitous routes of the psyche is his outstanding artistic hallmark. Thus, in *Ad hena*, as in all Agnon's works, the hero also lacks the courage to grapple with his true motivations, in this case, concerning his departure from Palestine. But, in a development characteristic of Agnon's later works, Malkah, a secondary character, possesses the power the main character lacks. A projection of Shmuel's guilty conscience, she candidly states her opinion about people and their ideals (before she notices her guest's discomfort and tactfully turns the conversation in another direction). Agnon wrote *Ad hena* from an emotional and aesthetic distance, in Jerusalem in 1952, long after he himself had fulfilled his Zionist commitment, and was thus able to probe the hidden motives underlying the ideal — something his hero refuses to do. The evasive nature of Agnonian heroes — and the narrator of *Ad hena* fits the mold — obliges the author to express truth indirectly and through varying subterfuges.

The Agnonian hero's vexed relationship to the outside world is dramatized in an exaggerated fashion in this novel. The reader comes to realize that Shmuel's assessments of his personal affairs are consistently off the mark, forming a pattern of recurring misperception. The anticipation of inevitable error casts Shmuel, the narrator, in an ironic light. He never seems to learn from experience and, unlike the reader, is always surprised by his own poor judgment.

Ad hena deals at length with the mundane problem of finding a suitable place to live, a source of perpetual irritation for Shmuel in Berlin during the war years and a dilemma that communicates the Agnonian hero's instability, even in the face of his endless quest for permanence and equanimity. In *Ad hena* the hero's meandering search for a room, symptomatic of his errant nature, metaphorically reflects the world war and the global misery it causes. But the recurring process of search, discovery, and departure also underscores predictable fallacies in the hero's understanding of himself and of things around him. Every time Shmuel rents a room "in despair" or through "lack of choice," both he and the reader are pleasantly surprised, because the stay there turns out much better than expected. Every time Shmuel believes he has found a "good" room, unforeseen events overtake him and eventually force him out of his lodgings. And the cycle begins again. Thus, late in the novel, in chapter 12, by which point the reader has caught on to the circularity and inner logic of the work, we suspect that disappointment lurks close by when the hero tells us that he has found "a lovely house in a charming neighborhood" with a room "more lovely" than all the previous

ones.⁸ True to form, no sooner does Agnon carefully and methodically develop the illusion of well-being than he tears it down with a clear allusion to a well-known work of European literature that casts the deluded party — the fallible narrator — in an ironic light.

At dusk I found myself in a room in Friedenau [a section of Berlin], a wonderfully spacious, exquisitely furnished room in a charming location. I hadn't set foot in such a room since I left Palestine. I turned on the lamp and sat at the desk. The chair was comfortable and everything in the house was pleasant. Even Hagen of the *Nibelungenlied*, gazing at me from the opposite wall, smiled amiably through his mien of naive cruelty. As I settled in my chair and a refreshing breeze fluttered in, I remembered nights from times gone by, quiet, peaceful nights, nights of patient work, and I was about to glance at my manuscript, which I had avoided since the outbreak of the war. But as the refreshing breeze blew in, a stench of dog manure arose in the house. I was as yet unaware that the landlady raised puppies for sale. Because of the stench I put aside my manuscript and picked up a book by Voltaire that I found in the room, and I read about the loveliest of possible worlds. That wasn't what the author titled his book, but I thought of it so, according to its contents.⁹

We learn from this account that the narrator is a writer of sorts who yearns for some peace and quiet in order to return to the manuscript he abandoned at the outbreak of the war. For a fleeting moment he thinks he might actually see his wish fulfilled. But immediately the stench of excrement penetrates the house and does away with that sweet illusion. At that moment Shmuel picks up a book, Voltaire's mischievous satire, *Candide ou de l'optimisme*, which he recalls not by its title but by "its contents" as describing "the loveliest of possible worlds," recalling to mind the narrator's loveliest of rooms.

Soon enough, this latest of dwellings is revealed as the ugliest and worst of them, just as the castle in Westphalia, extolled as the "noblest and most agreeable of all possible castles" in *Candide*, is eventually revealed in all its misfortune and horror.¹⁰ Shmuel, the naive and/or disingenuous protagonist of *Ad hena*, like the innocent Candide in Voltaire's satire, is subjected to alternating cycles of enchantment and disenchantment. The sharp odor of manure, the olfactory stimulus linking Shmuel's new room to Voltaire's book and its story about the expulsion of Candide from his "earthly paradise" in the noblest and most agreeable of castles, signals the reader that the wonderfully spacious, exquisitely furnished room is no earthly paradise either.

8 Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 126.

9 Ibid., p. 127–128.

10 This and other citations from *Candide* are from Richard Aldington's translation in *The Portable Voltaire*, New York, 1961, p. 229–328.

Shmuel becomes drowsy as he reads Voltaire's polemical work, and sleep brings on a dream. Agnonian heroes typically pass their waking lives in a miasma of unreality, whereas it is in their sleep that they confront their illusions and heed important messages. The dream in the works of Agnon is a conduit to the intricate workings of the mind, exposing the protagonist's suppressed feelings both to the reader of the work and to the dreamer in the work. If Shmuel was unwilling or unable to confront the Zionist question in Malkah's presence, he must do so in this sleep-induced vision, where in a typically Agnonian twist he is trapped by an inner truth he cannot escape. Shmuel also slips into his dream in a way characteristic of Agnon's works — on the fine line between waking and sleep. The vision, then, belongs to the two domains at the same time.

Henceforth the following dream will be central to my discussion of Agnon's Zionism: in Agnon's densely connotative language, an exhaustive examination of a single passage, with its complex network of association, can often yield more essential insights than does a survey of an entire book. This dream is an example of exactly this type of density, yoking together allusions to Jewish sources, such as the Bible and midrash, as well as to European literature.

That night, the first in my new room, I sat reading Voltaire's book on the best of all worlds. Reading made me sleepy, and sleep made me dream. In my dream I saw myself walking in a valley beneath Ba'al Bekhi, and I saw an old raven standing in a treetop and sticking his head out from his wings and crying "Arb, arb, arb!" And even though he was old and looked like Voltaire, I knew he wasn't Voltaire. He stuck out his snout and said to me, "Did you hear what I said? I said arb, arb, arb, and if you should happen to think it was arv, arv, arv, let me say it again: arb arb arb, initial open a, intermediate trilled r, final emphatic b. It's because of that sound that Adam called me oreb. Mind you, it's not orev with a v, but oreb with a b. And by the way, how come I don't see you by the Sea of Galilee or the Jordan or any other body of water in the Land of Israel? Do you think you're so pure that you don't need the waters of the Land of Israel?"¹¹

The two cultural worlds that nourished Agnon's creativity are represented in this odd dream. The traditional Jewish world is embodied in the raven, whose roots are as old as Adam himself. That same raven suggests Voltaire, the standard-bearer of European culture, who wrote *Candide* as a bitter response to Leibnitz, the early eighteenth-century German philosopher and mathematician.

11 Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 129.

But while the raven in the dream assumes a Hebraic pose, we are all familiar with fables by Aesop, La Fontaine, and Krylov, in which ravens and crows perched on trees sing off-key and mistake themselves for nightingales. Thus, one need not be an expert in the interpretation of dreams to infer that a moral does indeed hang on this dreamt parable. The reader is primed to expect a revelation of some human folly and the formulation of an appropriate lesson. But this expectation is not immediately realized because Agnon gives a new twist to a well-known literary genre by “Judaizing” it.

We might venture to say that this peculiar dream is a parable about a return to Zion: the raven, whose resemblance to Voltaire as well as his senescence are surely signs of wisdom, painstakingly explains the origins of his name to the hero and then wonders why Shmuel disappeared from the waters of his land — the Holy Land. As for Shmuel’s home in the Holy Land, a description of it has been given earlier during one of his fruitless searches for a domicile: he momentarily closes his eyes and recalls the room he abandoned in Jaffa, the sandy city by the Mediterranean, a room so glowingly depicted that its beauty seems almost unreal.¹² The pedantic raven, in other words, has good reason to wonder why Shmuel chooses to hunt desperately for a room in the Diaspora when he could have enjoyed his beautiful room in Palestine. Evidently the raven, true to its source, is saying: to thine own (Jewish) self be true, go back where you belong, for the Diaspora is not your home.

Yet the message of the dream is subtler. The use of the raven as a carrier of such a message is an informed artistic choice. Who, then, is he?

A universal symbol of evil portent, the raven is a bird with a biblical past, as we see in the dream’s association of the bird with Adam and the “waters of Israel.” After the Deluge, the raven was sent by Noah to explore the devastated landscape. Several midrashim assert the raven’s evil nature. Commenting on Noah’s dispatch of the raven, *Bereshit Rabbah* states: “Thus it is written (Ps. 105:28): ‘he sent darkness and it was dark.’”¹³ But the crafty raven in the dream attempts to conceal its darker essence by playing on the innocence of others: it flaunts its pedigree by evoking another midrash — that of Adam, who named all creatures — an in doing this the raven gives a wholly new interpretation to its own name. The midrash tells us:

The Lord brought all living creatures before him [Adam] so that he would name them. He named each creature according to its nature and according to

¹² Ibid., p. 89.

¹³ *Bereshit Rabbah*, sect. 33, no. 5. For the full English translation, see vol. 1 of *Midrash Rabbah*, trans. H. Freedman, London, 1961. Adapted from C.D. Yonge’s translation of Philo Judaeus, “Questions and Solutions to Genesis and Exodus,” *The Works of Philo Judaeus, the Contemporary of Josephus*, vol. 4, London, 1855, 1:20,22.

what he saw in them. He knew each one's secret, and these names have endured for all time.¹⁴

What did Adam have in mind when he named the raven "according to its nature"? One could reasonably conclude that when he saw a creature whose feathers were black as the approaching night he named it according to what he saw — *erev*, the Hebrew word for "evening". Therefore, Adam did not name the bird *oreb*, as the raven in the dream claims, but *orev*, playing on the word *erev* and its intimations of darkness (in Hebrew, *erev* and *orev* are spelled with the same consonants, *ayin*, *resh*, and *bet*; only the vowels vary). The raven in the dream cunningly substitutes a fictitious auditory association for a visual one and claims that Adam named it for its cries.

Hence, anyone who would accept the raven's specious argument is himself naive. In the midrash, Adam does not assign the animals their names according to the sounds they make but on the basis of their appearance or essence, some inherent quality. Sound symbolism, indeed, is rare, especially in those commentaries dealing with Adam's naming of animals.¹⁵ Yet even without a knowledge of the midrash, the attentive reader suspects that the raven was not named for its cries; the hairsplitting precision with which it explains its name raises a red flag. Three times, its cries are repeated and spelled out. Moreover, the black-hued creature is not even sure if its cries registered correctly and to avoid any confusion it insists: "let me say it again: *arb arb arb*, initial open *a*, intermediate trilled *r*, final emphatic *b*." If the raven finds it necessary to reiterate these cries, they cannot have been clear and obvious. Like the fabled raven that tries to sing like a nightingale and fails, Agnon's raven strains to "ennoble" itself — to no avail.

The raven's claim that its name should be *oreb* (when in fact it is *orev*) is a deliberate deception, for the reference to the Hebrew etymology of the name is patently absurd. The raven's cries are decidedly Germanic, not Hebraic, especially in the emphasis placed on the final consonant. The *b* in the word *arb* is not a Hebrew phoneme at all: in Hebrew the closing form of the letter *bet*, signifier of the sound *b*, is always pronounced softly, as *v*. Lastly, as the reader surely knows, no earthly raven ever cried *arb* — in any language. The strident screech of the raven is *caw* or a variant thereof (in Hebrew, *craw*). Agnon himself affirms this elsewhere in *Ad hena*.¹⁶ There is

14 Mordekhai Margalioth, ed. *The Great Midrash on the Five Books of Moses: Genesis* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1947, Bereshit 2:19, p. 85.

15 See Samuel Belkin, "Midrash hashemot bephilon" (Hebrew), *Horeb* 12 (Elul 1956) pp. 3–61.

16 When Shmuel encounters the neglect of a formerly beautiful garden that has become overrun with thorns after its caretaker's death, he laments: "A garden that was once more beautiful than any other...is now desolate. Its buds have withered, an axe has felled the trees, and ravens are screeching 'caw! caw!'" Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 28.

consequently no doubt that the raven's "caws" are not "arbs." The raven has not only revealed himself as misleading, but has also become associated with desolation, neglect, and decay.

Thus our first interpretation of Shmuel's dream: the very creature who goads Shmuel to return to his origins (Palestine), has been shown to repeatedly misrepresent himself in describing of the origins of his name. How dare the raven, himself guilty of duplicity and self-deception, accuse Shmuel of betrayal? Again we ask: Who is this raven, and what does he represent?

Here again classical Jewish texts point the way to an answer. In Genesis 8:7–8, Noah sends forth the raven and then the dove to see if the waters of the Flood have subsided. From the puzzling verse, "He sent out a raven, and it went to and fro, until the waters had dried up from the earth" (Gen. 8:7), it is difficult to ascertain what the raven accomplished after it was sent out. The dove's behavior is much more comprehensible — it "could not find a resting place for its foot" because "there was water over all the earth" and therefore returned to the ark. The raven is mysterious: it is sent out into conditions under which it is impossible to find a resting-place, as the dove demonstrates, yet it fails to return. It would be difficult to conceive of more sophisticated, or more ironic, projection on Shmuel's part. Both the raven, herald of Zionist guilt, and Shmuel himself are equally characterized by inexplicable failure to return in spite of inability to find a "resting place."¹⁷

Traditional biblical commentators made short work out of seemingly baffling biblical passages, and it is not surprising that the perplexing disappearance of the raven provides the point of departure for many midrashim. A major theme in these midrashim is the delineation of the antithetical natures of the raven and the dove, archetypical symbols of evil and good, darkness and purity, manipulation and innocence. How could the raven, sent out into the flooded world, manage to survive? The commentator, in answer, turns to an allegory: this is not a literal raven, but a "symbol of evil appetites and lusts that engulf the soul and condemn it to perdition, corrupting the life of man."¹⁸ Hence, this interpretation coincides with the other midrash that depicts the raven not as a living creature but as a principle of darkness, a negative force — and in addition, a reflection of the generation of the Deluge, which was destroyed because of its evil deeds.

This image of Agnon's raven as a creature whose dominant traits are narcissism and dishonesty, when combined with the midrashic perception of the raven as a "symbol of evil appetites and lusts," will bring us back to the

¹⁷ I am indebted to Jacob Press for this point.

¹⁸ See Samuel Belkin, "Questions and Answers to Genesis and Exodus by Philo Judaeus — The Earliest Source for the Midrash" (Hebrew), in *The Abraham Weiss Jubilee Volume*, New York, 1964, pp. 579–633, esp. 604. See also Yonge, "Questions and Solutions," 2:39.

protagonist of *Ad hena*. This self-centered individual continually attempts to deceive both the world and himself concerning his true desires and motives. As the ravages of war pile up the wounded and the dead, the starving and the maimed, he concerns himself with his creature comforts. With considerable redundancy he recounts petty exploits involving his room, his meals, his clothes, and other everyday trivialities.

Despite his attempts to imbue these trifles with an aura of ideological importance, the oneiric stratum of the novel discloses that they are a smokescreen concealing a powerful erotic attraction that has taken hold of the narrator, guiding his every step. Only a sensitive reading of the work reveals that the hero's attraction — to a married, gentile German actress named Brigitta Schimmermann — is unswerving, despite his tireless efforts to divert his own and everyone else's attention from this fact. Shmuel (and Agnon) would like to camouflage the telltale signs of this magnetic attraction. But the truth is that Shmuel's every thought, decision, and action, his very perception of things, is controlled by his lust for a forbidden woman.

Once the fact of this buried attraction has come to light, the pieces of the puzzle fall into place, and the novel's structure as well as the hero's perplexing behavior begin to make sense. *Cherchez la femme*. Perhaps it was because of a woman that Shmuel left Palestine for Germany. Perhaps it is because of a woman, and not the war, that Shmuel, like all Agnonian heroes, finds no peace, moves from one room to another, and wanders the streets at odd hours, seeking the object of his love. The hero refuses to acknowledge this truth, just as he refuses Malkah's insight about Zionism, and it is diverted. Like the black bird that trills "*arb, arb, arb*" in order to belie the fact that it is a creature of darkness, the hero, too, invents clever explanations for his conduct, wearing a mask of propriety and parading his impeccable credentials.

But the deception has its limitations and truth prevails, revealed in a dream. The raven challenges Shmuel, "And by the way, how come I don't see you by the Sea of Galilee or the Jordan or any other body of water in the Land of Israel? Do you think you're so pure that you don't need the waters of the Land of Israel?" In the darker recesses of the world of dreams the avenues of escape are closed. Shmuel hears the raven urging him to cleanse himself of those appetites which have led to his exile, through a reimmersion in the waters of the Holy Land.

In essence, the raven's shrewd question is the same as Malkah's: "You already lived in Israel, so why did you leave? Could it be for the same reason that causes everyone to be dissatisfied, wherever they are?" Malkah, who artlessly adds that Shmuel need not be ashamed to tell her the truth, never hears it because Shmuel's lips are sealed. But Malkah and the raven

exteriorize buried aspects of Shmuel's psyche and, in their innuendos and rhetorical questions, both allude to the hero's forbidden passions and suppressed desires.

Malkah is innocent as a dove. Despite her age (she is fifteen years older than Shmuel), Shmuel remarks: "Why do I mention her age? Because if she impresses you as being overly naive, don't be surprised. She was born in an age when people were not ashamed of their innocence."¹⁹ Agnon alludes to this quality of dovelike innocence (the antithesis of the raven's cunning) in describing Malkah's joy over Shmuel's visit, when she is too excited to sit still for a minute: "she found no resting place for the sole of her foot"²⁰ — a direct quote from Genesis referring to the dove that returned to Noah's ark (Gen. 8:9). But Malkah's innocence is not a sign of simple-mindedness. Her razor-sharp insight, in addition to her age, demonstrates that she is a woman of wisdom and experience. She and the raven, after all, are two parts of a single entity: the repressed interior (the raven) and the ingenuous exterior (the dove) of the narrator in *Ad hena*, who simultaneously resembles and differs from the sharp Voltaire and his innocent Candide.

The raven then resembles Candide, inasmuch as both bear names expressing their quintessential trait; yet the raven is not a candid Candide. Rather, he is more like Voltaire himself, who created a naive character in order to prove that naivete has no place in a world as cruel as ours. This multidimensional raven was Agnon's deliberate choice, reminding his apparently naive character, Shmuel, of his origins.

From all we have said thus far, it would seem that Agnon used the raven as an envoy for the message of Zionist return because of its negative associations, thereby expressing a suppressed aspect of Shmuel's personal views. Only a dream encounter with the raven and the disclosure of its manipulative nature can prod the hero into abandoning his twisted ways for the straight path. The dream affords Shmuel the opportunity to view himself from the vantage point of a spectator, observing and evaluating his own behavior. But probing further in the midrash we find a new dimension that gives a new twist to our understanding of the raven and his "by the way" message concerning the return to Israel.

Why, of all the winged creatures in the ark, was the raven sent out first? Philo of Alexandria claims that Noah believed the raven was a premonitory bird, "an animal particularly set apart for being sent on messages and employed in offices; for to this very day many people watch its mode of flight and its chattering, judging that it gives some intimation of unknown facts."²¹

19 Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 41.

20 Ibid., p. 56.

21 Yonge, "Questions and Solutions," 2:35.

In the *Midrash Ne'elam* of the Zohar, we read: "Noah was a wise man who understood the whispers and chirrupings of all living beings and their intimations. When he was in the ark, he said: 'I know no bird other than the clever raven that can best signal the state of things in the world.' And he immediately sent out the raven."²² Another midrash follows up, explaining that Noah, aware of the raven's wickedness, refused to take it back into the ark. The Lord then told Noah to receive it because it was destined to fulfill a mission in future times: in the First Book of Kings, ravens would bring food to Elijah the prophet at the waters of Cherith.²³

This last midrash, associating the raven of Noah's ark with the ravens mentioned in First Kings, chapter 17, explains why the wicked raven was permitted to survive after the Deluge, an apparent paradox, since the express purpose of the Flood was to obliterate evil and injustice from the world once and for all. The account in Kings begins with Elijah's prophecy of drought to Ahab, an Israelite king who worshiped Ba'al and Asherah (Astarte). The Bible states that "Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, God of Israel, than all the kings of Israel who were before him" (1 Kings 16:33). After pronouncing his dire prophecy, Elijah was forced to hide by the brook at Cherith, east of the Jordan. There, the waters of the Jordan quenched Elijah's thirst, and God commanded the ravens to bring him bread and meat (1 Kings 17:2-4).

The bitter, prolonged conflict between Elijah and Ahab over the moral and religious fiber of the Israelite kingdom is one of the most dramatic stories in the Book of Kings, and echoes of this conflict reverberate in Shmuel's dream in *Ad hena*. The hero, in his dream, is rambling in a valley below Ba'al Bekhi — a location recalling the name of a pagan deity (Ba'al) revered in the northern region of Canaan as well as the name of a geographic location, Ba'albek in Lebanon. This cluster of names and places also implicates Ahab, who, influenced by his wife Jezebel, the daughter of Ethba'al, king of the Sidonians, spread the cult of Ba'al in Israel and supported its Israelite priests. A countervailing force unites the raven and the waters of Israel mentioned in the dream with Elijah, the lonely prophet who remained true to his faith. It was Elijah who defied the many priests of Ba'al and fled to the brook of Cherith before the Jordan, where "ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank of the brook" (1 Kings 17:6).

22 *Midrash Ne'elam*, an important part of the Zohar, is a mystical commentary on Genesis 1-32; Exodus 13-17; Leviticus 16-18; and Deuteronomy 21-25. For the Hebrew version of the passage cited, see Belkin, "Questions and Answers," p. 603. The notion that the raven is a premonitory bird is also mentioned in the Talmud, tractate Gittin 45a; there, premonitory powers are attributed to the dove as well.

23 Bereshit Rabbah, 33:5.

Thus it would seem that the raven's evil attributes are more than offset by its virtues: wisdom and premonitory gifts. The raven survived the Deluge because the world would one day have need of it. The Lord said to Noah: "A righteous man [Elijah] will arise and dry up the world [bring on a drought], and I will cause him to have need of them [the ravens]." ²⁴ The raven was elected by God to revive Elijah so that after three years of drought the prophet might convince the multitude on Mount Carmel to choose the glory of God over the nullity of Ba'al. Elijah, having sanctified the Lord in the eyes of the multitude, seized the prophets of Ba'al, brought them down to the brook of Kishon, and there slew them (1 Kings 18). Indirectly, the ravens helped Elijah eradicate an idolatrous cult that had claimed thousands of adherents. Had it not been for the ravens' sustenance at the waters of Cherith, the Israelites would have continued to waver between two opposing worlds. In other words, they would not have returned to their God, to the source of their national and religious heritage. ²⁵

Against this background, the allusion in *Ad hena* is intensely rich. The raven is a splendid choice to urge Shmuel, who is rambling throughout Germany, to give up alien gods and goddesses — the modern counterparts of Ba'al and Asherah — and cease wavering between the gentile world to which he is drawn and the Zionist Jewish world to which he belongs. For Shmuel, vacillation has become a way of life and he must cleanse himself of the habit. The one who points the way back home is not a pure and innocent dove bearing an olive branch from Jerusalem, but a black raven from Ba'al Bekhi. This legendary bird, gifted with wisdom and insight, knows that Shmuel's wandering will come to an end. This premonitory creature, whose flight patterns and caws reveal secrets and mysteries, intimates that Shmuel will never find a permanent roof over his head outside the Land of Israel. The vagabond must therefore wend his way back to Israel, where he will find a parcel of land on which to build a home, brick by brick. ²⁶

The call summoning Shmuel to return to the water — an ablution symbolizing his immersion in the pristine sources of his Jewish identity — needs no further explanation. The life-giving and purifying properties of water (which account for the expression "spring of life") and the medicinal and spiritual virtues of the waters of Israel, especially those of the Jordan, are

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Bereshit Rabbah 33:5 discusses the ravens at Cherith. R. Judah believed the word *orvim* refers to residents of a town within the borders of Bashan, called Arbo. R. Nehemiah interpreted it as a literal reference to ravens. The Radak, a twelfth-century biblical exegete, maintained that the *orvim* at Cherith may have been merchants (see 1 Kings 17:4). It is conceivable that these anthropomorphic interpretations of *orvim* inspired Agnon to play the game of the name and to draw a comparison between Voltaire and a "human" *orev*.

²⁶ Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 168.

well known and the water-symbolism in the dream is self-evident; the raven and the setting of Ba'al Bekhi were puzzling elements, with more obscure symbolic connotations.

Only by exploring the Biblical and midrashic nexus between Elijah, Ahab, Noah, and the raven could we arrive at the most complete and penetrating insight into Shmuel's dream. The association of raven and water in the Jewish mind automatically connects the dream to the story of the raven and the dove which Noah sent to ascertain the height of the Flood waters. The midrashim concerning the inherent evil of the raven add another dimension to the dream, one that allows the hero in *Ad hena* to observe himself — in the guise of a raven — in action and obliges him to acknowledge his flaws. But a third and equally important dimension stands the negative image of the raven on its head. The premonitory powers of the raven, whose flight patterns and caws must be closely monitored, imbue the rhetorical question in Shmuel's dream with greater significance, as if the bird has given some "intimation of unknown facts." In effect, the raven — who indirectly helped the children of Israel destroy an abomination and reclaim their honor and uniqueness — indirectly helps a solitary Jew from Palestine, Shmuel Yosef, reclaim his selfhood and integrity by choosing the better of two conflicting worlds.

The notion of inhabiting the best of all possible worlds — the suggested name of Voltaire's book in *Ad hena* — is evident also in early Jewish thought. Named in *Ad hena* "according to its contents" and its author's impulse to compose a repudiation of Leibnitzian optimism, *Candide* brings to mind a well-known midrash. Leibnitz in his *Thèodicy* (1710) was not the first to claim that we inhabit the best of possible worlds, and if a better one had been possible, God would have created it. According to this midrash: "The Holy One, blessed be He, went on creating worlds and destroying them until He created this one and declared, 'This one pleases Me; those did not please me.'²⁷ Thus, the planet created in Genesis did not represent an absolute beginning nor was it "new." It was one of many worlds formed by God until He created the most "pleasant" (in Hebrew, *arev*) or best of them.

The Deluge can be seen as another link in the series of worlds that were successively destroyed. Aside from the aforementioned midrash, the Bible also states that God beheld his creation and saw that it was very good — until the wickedness of men in Noah's age made the Lord regret the creation of man and bring on the Flood. But did this annihilation really succeed in

27 Bereshit Rabbah 3:7; 9:2; Kohelet Rabbah 3:11. These midrashim relate to the dispute as to whether an eternal matter existed prior to the creation of heaven and earth. This midrash implies that God created the world from pre-existing, amorphous material.

blotting out evil or in making this world more pleasant in the eyes of the Lord? It seems not. The dream is a reminder that the wicked antediluvian raven, named by Adam, endured after the Deluge. It is a living testimony to uneradicated and ineradicable evil — evil in the heart of man that will not be blotted out. For centuries Jewish exegetes grappled with the question of evil and posited that it serves a primordial function in this world. For if the Almighty allowed the wicked raven to survive, so that it might carry out its life-preserving task at Cherith, then perhaps the world cannot exist without evil. Conceivably, after so many failed experiments, the Almighty may have decided to let the best of possible worlds be.

What has all this to do with the Zionist idea?

If Zionism is construed as a longing for perfection, a desire to see all one's hopes for a "pleasant" world fulfilled in the land of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, then it is based upon false hopes. Even the Almighty's attempt to create a uniformly pleasant world failed, as witnessed by the raven's stubborn survival. Trilling the letters *a-r-b* so as to disguise its essence, the raven inadvertently betrays itself in the act and method of its deception. The Hebrew reader knows that the raven was named *orev* — and not *oreb* — because it was black, the color of evening (*erev*). The Hebrew reader is equally aware that the three letters in the raven's name — *ayin*, *resh*, and *bet* — are the same as those in the Hebrew words denoting pleasure and displeasure (*arev*, *lo arev*). Thus the *orev*'s name also recalls the worlds that were "unpleasant" ("*lo arevim*") in the eyes of the Lord.

In view of the multiple Hebrew word patterns, alliterations, puns, and derivatives stemming from the letters *a-r-v*, Agnon's use of the term *lo arev* to describe Malkah and her unpleasant truth about Zionism could hardly have been accidental. The word *arev*, which also connotes gastronomic pleasure, as in *arev lahekh* (palatable), is heard twice in Malkah's discussion of Zionism. Thus, when Malkah senses that for Shmuel the flavor of her conversation is unpleasant, or unpalatable, she goes on to talk about something else, even though "nothing in the world could have pleased her more [*arev lah*] than to continue talking about the subject [Zionism] she debated in her mind."²⁸ For Malkah, engaging in a lively Zionist debate is a pleasant intellectual pastime, whereas for Shmuel the debate is a reminder of his erotic and gastronomic appetites, the hedonism that removes him from his Zionist way of life. Hence at this stage in the hero's development, Zionism is an unpalatable and painful topic of conversation.

Like Voltaire's *Candide*, who was expelled from Westphalia (a land he once thought an earthly paradise), then voluntarily left Eldorado (a land

28 Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 42.

whose singular beauty easily outshone that of Westphalia), finding peace in neither of these places, Shmuel has even greater cause to be dissatisfied with his unhappy lot in Palestine and war-torn Germany. Until he dreams his sobering dream about a raven and water — a vision that reminds him of the forsaken dream of Zion — he frantically chases after a lost paradise or the best of possible worlds in Europe. Though war rages in Germany and though he admits that “as nightmarish as our dreams may be, they are no worse than reality,”²⁹ in his heart he doggedly persists in cultivating his illusions. Despite all the evil revealed to him in kaleidoscopic shapes and colors, he still cherishes his private little dream and surrenders himself to a vain search for a perfect room, an inaccessible woman, and for the “quiet, peaceful nights” conducive to patient work on his book.

Voltaire's *Candide* provides an essential counterpart to Agnon's *Ad Hena*. Both are picaresque works, in both the rumbles of war and the mangled bodies are ever present, in both the heroes lead the lives of vagabonds and know well the vagaries of life. But *Candide*, the book which Shmuel finds in the “loveliest room” where he dreams his Zionist dream, also provides a deeper insight into Agnon's Zionist idea. The idea of creating for oneself the best of all possible worlds, an earthly paradise, concludes Voltaire's book. It is introduced toward the end by an old Turk, a hard-working farmer, not a philosopher, one who condenses his entire worldview into a single formula: “Work keeps at bay three evils: boredom, vice, and need.” The protagonist of *Ad Hena*, who in his exile has had his daily fill of the “three evils,” is urged, not only by the biblical raven but through the allusion to *Candide* as well, to return to tilling the land, to Zionism. It is the best of possible worlds, earthly paradise, that can be achieved through human efforts. It is an everyday brand of Eden — terra firma, nothing spectacular — but this humble paradise is free of lies and deceptions. The old Turk guides *Candide* and the old raven guides Shmuel to put an end to their nonsensical adventures and in the face of all temptations and gilded illusions to insist: “but we must cultivate our gardens.”

Thus far Shmuel, Agnon's protagonist. And now, consider the case of Agnon himself. When he reached the shores of Jaffa in 1907, the gateway to his hopes and dreams, Agnon did not know that the gates of paradise had shut behind him, nor could he foresee that his romantic fantasies about life in the Holy Land would dissolve as he struggled amid the scorching sands of Palestine. He described this loss of innocence in *A Guest for the Night* (1939), in which the protagonist observes: “The Land of Israel that shows itself to me in dreams is not the Land as it is today.”³⁰ Bitter indeed were his

29 Ibid., p. 10.

30 S.Y. Agnon, *A Guest for the Night*, trans. Misha Louvish, New York, 1968, p. 92.

experiences among the sand hills of Jaffa, where he lived in social and spiritual isolation. His double solitude and the ennui, dreariness, and disappointment of unrequited love are described in his early works, *Agunot* ("Limbo," 1908) and *Givat hahol* ("The Hill of Sand," 1920). Unable to come to terms with the gap between reality and dream, Agnon forsook the ideal of tilling the soil in Palestine and sailed back to the Old World, to the cultural refinements of European civilization. Shmuel Yosef Agnon and, by extension, his protagonist, Shmuel Yosef, must take a rest from the Zionist dream — leaving the good room in Jaffa for a time and wander about Europe. With the passage of time, they feel the stirrings of a forgotten dream and they long to return — to a land of yellow sands, but to one of healing waters as well. In their maturity, this resurgent dream is no longer naive.

Thus the Land of Israel, the contradictory old-new land of legends, dreams, and harsh reality, can yet become a tangible, man-made Garden of Eden. Its celebrated waters, though not abundant, can be brought nearer to the sand dunes and the desert to make the wilderness bloom. The gap between the land and its promise, between dream and reality, will not be closed by miracles, but by human labor. Such land and such work may not constitute the best of all possible worlds or the best of dreams. The Zionist idea requires the tilling and preservation of a land that is perhaps more refractory than others, yet with diligence and patience, it can be made to yield its physical and spiritual bounty.

Ad hena is an autobiographical *Bildungsroman* about the centrality of the private world of the individual in the face of global events. As explored through one dream in the novel, reason and sanity come to supplant delusion and fantasy for a single person. Shmuel's dream is as much about physical exile as it is about the perils of internal exile and alienation from the self, which pave the road to self-deception. Significantly, it is through the medium of a dream that Agnon negates the illusions of dreams. *Ad hena* is also a story of renunciation and reconciliation — the renunciation of an impossible dream and a reconciliation with the realities of life. This workable vision of life is sober and disabused, of a kind that can be realized here and now, for it is already in and of this world.