

“LIKE A MAN IN EXILE FROM
THE PALACE OF HIS FATHER”:
DRAMAS OF WRITING IN THE FICTION
OF S. Y. AGNON

by

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“Not like all the other tongues is the holy tongue, for all the other tongues are only conventional, as nation after nation agreed upon its tongue, but in the holy tongue the Torah was given and with it the Holy One Blessed be He created His world.”—S. Y. Agnon (1968a, v. 2, p. 296)¹

“In the beginning is hermeneutics.”—Jacques Derrida (1978, p. 67)

To enter Agnon’s fictive universe, one must acknowledge the very central place occupied by Torah as the fabric of the world that both contains Creation and binds God to Israel. Torah, as pre-existing text, authorizes subsequent interpretations in the assumption that they are already contained within it. Using the texts of rabbinic tradition, Agnon maps out this territory in *Sēpēr, sōpēr vēsippūr* (“Book, Writer and Story”). But, we might ask, what place is there for the modern writer within this view of a world structured by the word of God? What structures do the writer’s words generate and what space do they occupy in relation to Torah? Hebrew literature has had to work out its relationship to the sacred texts of Jewish tradition, and the conflict between sacred and secular has proved in many ways to be an energizing source for the modern writer.

Torah constitutes something of a mythic center in Agnon’s fictive universe, a text of presence where word and thing join. Within this emblematic geography, two sorts of movement can be discerned: movement away from or toward the source. More interesting than any simple

1. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

linear movement of departure and return is the expression of both movements simultaneously in the text. In this exploitation of ironic structure, Agnon is particularly the modernist, redefining narrative and text in ways that make us acknowledge their indeterminacy. Agnon constitutes himself as writer through his play with the texts of Judaism and so raises questions as to the nature of writing as a redemptive act or as the usurpation of a prior text which is, ultimately, the Torah.

This essay examines some of the ways in which writing and intertextuality are thematized in a number of works by Agnon. In the texts I shall discuss, *Al ʿeben ʿahat* ("Upon a Stone"), *Hûš harêah* ("The Sense of Smell"), several stories from *Sēper hammaʿāsîm* ("The Book of Deeds"), and *Orêah nāṭā lālûn* ("A Guest for the Night"), the Agnon text evokes a predecessor in order to mythologize writing, or more specifically, in order to invoke the world-defining capacities of prior texts and to position itself in relation to them.

Two stories from the 1930's, *Al ʿeben ʿahat* ("Upon a Stone") and *Hûš harêah* ("The Sense of Smell") offer tales of the writer that occupy something of a middle ground between the early stories of Hemdat, the artist as youth, and *Sēper hammaʿāsîm*, the book of deeds in which nothing happens, but the act of telling itself. Agnon has before him the model of language of Torah: language which contains the world. He enacts the attempt and failure to attain the linguistic level of the sacred; or, as in *Al ʿeben ʿahat* and *Hûš harêah*, he enacts brief moments of participation which appear to lift language beyond itself, but are essentially mock-heroic. That is, the text adumbrates a move by which it will try (and fail) to transform itself.

Al ʿeben ʿahat, written in 1934, mimics a passage in the *Sēper šibhê habbešî* ("The Book of Praises of the Baal Shem Tov"); in the source passage in *Šibhê habbešî* (Horodetzky, 1975, p. 51), the Baal Shem Tov apostrophizes a stone, so that it opens up and he can place his writings in it. Without ever explicitly referring to the Baal Shem Tov, Agnon's story invokes this act of enclosure in a variety of ways that may make us aware of the story of the Besht as well as of stories of other wonder-working rabbis.

The first-person narrator of *Al ʿeben ʿahat* is a writer, but he opens his story by referring to the days in which he devoted himself to study of the deeds of the wonder-working Rabbi Adam Baal Shem, a predecessor of the Baal Shem Tov, who used the holy writings in his possession to bring about the redemption of souls in Israel. The narrator defines himself as storyteller by delineating his distance from the kind of lin-

guistic power with which the Rabbi Adam Baal Shem's holy writings endowed him: "Indeed even if I did not attain to reading in them [the rabbi's wonder-working texts], I attained to telling about them" (1968a, v. 2, p. 303). Those writings do not belong to the roots of his soul, as he puts it, and so he cannot possess their world-creating powers.

In a seemingly pious image, the narrator depicts himself as the metal which surrounds or encases precious jewels but does not mingle in substance with the precious jewels (the earlier texts) that it holds: "I would sit and look at them [every letter, word, column and page of the Rabbi's writings] and my eyes would surround them like a metal that surrounds precious stones and the precious stones do not mingle with it" (p. 303). This image of metal as container suggests a separateness that defines the initial stance of the narrator; at the same time, however, the narrative makes some significant moves that modify its distance from the story it tells. While the narrator opens *Al 'eben ahat* with an acknowledgement of the spatial and temporal distance which separates his use of language from that of the wonder-working rabbi, the narrative shifts emphasis in a way that suggests a move toward substitution. That is, the story moves away from telling and toward re-enactment of an important segment of the story of Rabbi Adam Baal Shem. Narration itself consumes plot; telling moves into the foreground as a form of action. As Felman (1982, p. 126) observes: "Narrative as such turns out to be the trace of the action of a reading; it is, in fact, reading as action." Perhaps the image of a narrator as container for the precious jewels of Rabbi Adam Baal Shem's texts offers a relevant ambiguity: the image speaks ostensibly of separateness, but it does so through a figure of incorporation.

The narrator tells us how the Rabbi Adam Baal Shem went to the forest to give up his writings to a rock, in a pious gesture of renunciation, when the time for his death drew near. Through a series of highly emblematic encounters, the narrator "inadvertently" reenacts a latter-day version of this renunciation and so brings about a linguistic play that mimics a mystical moment in which word and world are fused. This reenactment or move toward substitution begins when the narrator takes his own writing to the woods, just as he is approaching the point in his work at which he will describe Rabbi Adam Baal Shem's move to the forest to give up his writing. The move outdoors brings the narrator into nature, God's book writ large, where he sees a world that is indeed in harmony with its Creator. Not only animals, but every bush as well converses with its Maker, he notes with word plays that are lost in

translation, but suggest the mingling of word and thing: “*Kol śiaḥ mēsīaḥ ‘im hammaqôm*” (“Every field-shrub converses with the Omnipresent”) (p. 303). The spelling of shrub is the same as the root for “converse” (*śyḥ*), suggesting the sort of playing with homonymous roots that is widely used in midrashic interpretation. In addition, the term for God also indicates place: God is place and place is God, a further suggestion of the unity of God and nature. The language play of the later text, that is, the one we read, establishes the unity of God and nature that constitutes the divine text.

But the narrator as writer is situated ambiguously between the traditionally structured world that is governed by God’s law and his devotion to his own labors, specifically, his writing. The split becomes evident as plot complications set up a suggestive opposition between, on the one hand, the Sabbath with its prohibition on transgressing the *tēḥûm* and, on the other, the narrator’s attachment to his writings, which have remained in the forest outside the *tēḥûm*. Writing is an activity that threatens transgression of the *tēḥûm*, and we notice that the narrator’s dilemma demands choice between devotion to his own texts or to God’s. Six days of labor have gone into the creation of each: “If I go to the town, I will end up forfeiting everything I accomplished in six days, and if I go to the forest the holy Sabbath will come in and I will not come in with it” (p. 304). In a manner reminiscent of midrashic hermeneutics, the nouns that indicate his alternatives are anagrams of each other: play with the *yod-‘ayin-reš* of *ya‘ar* or forest produces the *‘ayin-yod-reš* of *‘ir* or city. The presence of this kind of anagrammatic play in Agnon’s text contextualizes the narrator’s dilemma in a tradition of interpretation and suggests that the solution will consist of still further interpretation.

In a passage that begs the question of intentionality, the narrator records the resolution of his dilemma: “As I stood deliberating in my mind my legs picked themselves up and went to the forest” (p. 304). The narrator returns to the forest to find his writings exactly as he left them on the rock, miraculously undisturbed by wind or beast or bird. But as he stands there gazing at his texts, the stone opens up, takes in his writings and closes again. God’s world, God’s language, exerts its priority over man in the enclosure of his texts.

The narrator’s loss of control over his own texts resembles the voluntary action of his predecessor, Rabbi Adam Baal Shem, who entrusted his texts to God by acquiescing in their enclosure in a stone. The narrator’s texts may not be as wonderful, and his relinquishing of control over them may not come of his own volition, but, in reduced form (appropriate to our time, Agnon might say), the parallel remains.

The outcome of the narrator's instance of yielding is an enchanting moment of conscious participation in the harmony of nature. In effect, the narrator tells the story of his achievement of inclusion: "I surrounded the stones with my eyes, like the dirt of the land that surrounds the stone" (p. 304); the verb *hqp* is used for the movement of his eyes which "encompass" the surroundings; it is used again for the earth which "encompasses" the rocks he sees before him. The verb is central to the action here, which is more the drama of language in Creation than any conventional notion of plot. The narrator first used the verb *hqp* for the image of his relationship to Rabbi Adam Baal Shem's texts: "And my eyes encompassed them like the metal that surrounds precious stones . . ." (p. 303); he imagines enclosing the texts visually, but acknowledges his inability to read them. By contrast, the later usage affirms his enclosure in God's world/text; the narrator achieves a marvelous "fit" into the world, although his eyes as recording instrument retain the capacity and thus identity of the observer. It no longer matters which rock has enclosed his particular texts: a landscape opens before the narrator in which language forms the world. Scholem (1971, p. 293) speaks of the language "which lives in things as their creative principle"; "the secret signatures (*riššûmîm*) that God had placed upon things are as much concealments of His revelation as revelation of His concealment."

Through these narrative moves, the text of *Al ʿeben aḥai* reconstitutes itself as a survivor text that recounts the story of a lost predecessor text. This relationship of survivor text to predecessor text fits the model established by the tradition of tales which recount the deeds of wonder-working rabbis; Agnon's text, like the Besht story or the story of the Rabbi Adam Baal Shem, is the story of prior miraculous deeds told by a follower or latecomer who does not possess his predecessor's powers and can only speak of them from a distance. Like the texts of the Rabbi Adam Baal Shem (and, for that matter, the writings of the Besht that were sealed in a stone), Agnon's predecessor text appears to be lost to us. Nevertheless, according to the model, enclosure in a rock expresses the surrender that is piety; the predecessor text may be lost as text, but it has been absorbed back into God's text. But of course Agnon's predecessor text is a fiction, a fiction that is generated by the story we read. By generating the fiction of a predecessor text and telling a story of miraculous enclosure/absorption into God's prior text, the Agnon text defines itself on the basis of contiguity and so enlarges the compass of tradition to include itself. Through these narrative maneuvers, *Al ʿeben aḥai* manages the delicate suggestion that it has remained within the *tēhûm* itself, has refrained from transgression and has thus achieved the delicate

moment of participation in a linguistic universe with which the story closes.

Al ʿeben aḥat achieves an even deeper measure of enclosure by its use of a tale from *Sēper šibhê habbešt*. The holy writings that the Besht possesses go back to the time of Abraham and Joshua (*Šibhê habbešt*, p. 51); their magical powers stem from their antiquity, that is to say, their closeness to the world-creating language of Torah. In this respect, it is interesting also to consider that “Baal Shem,” a title that long predates the rise of Hasidism, designates one “who knows the secret of the Tetragrammaton pronounced, as well as other ‘holy names’ and also knows how to work miraculous deeds with the power of these names” (Scholem, 1962). In telling the story of the Baal Shem Tov’s capacity to perform magical deeds with the writings, the narrator of the *Seper šibhê habbešt* tells a story of the collapse of metaphor, the transformation of word into deed, but of course he does so at a well-defined narrative distance. Using the model of the Hasidic tale and engaging in play with narrative conventions, the Agnon text contrives to bring about its own collapse of distance between teller and tale, latecomer and predecessor. But of course, it is the very condition of textuality that insures its failure and limits it to mimicry.

Wineman (1978) notes a significant difference between the source story in the *Sēper šibhê habbešt* and *Al ʿeben ʿaḥat*: in the former, the Rabbi Adam Baal Shem designates the Rabbi Israel of Okopy (that is, he who is to become the Besht) as the recipient of his writings, whereas Agnon’s story simply recounts the sealing of the Rabbi Adam Baal Shem’s writings in a rock. Thus, the earlier story sets up a structure that implies transmission of the texts in question to a spiritual heir. Wineman concludes that Agnon omits this portion of the Besht story in order to imply that his narrator, unlike the Besht, is not fit to receive the holy writings of the Rabbi Adam Baal Shem. Insofar as Agnon’s story mimics an existing narrative pattern, Wineman’s comments draw the reader’s attention to an omission in the story’s structure, a kind of negative space that produces meaning by reminding us of what Agnon has left out. Agnon’s text enacts a fiction of inclusion that conceals within it acknowledgement of its marginality.

In *Al ʿeben aḥat*, the speaker describes what could almost be considered a wish: were he able to read the texts of the Rabbi Adam Baal Shem that were hidden in the rock, he would be able to “join together” worlds out of them (p. 303). *Al ʿeben aḥat* implies levels of linguistic

activity, in order of descending strength, but on the model of a world-creating use of language. At the mythical point of origin, word is thing. *Hûš harêah*, written in 1937, enters this mythology of writing by building on the traditional belief that language is prior even to creation. The holy tongue may be constituted in Scripture: "But the holy tongue is that in which Torah is given and with it the Holy One Blessed be He created His world, and seraphim and ophanim and holy creatures praise Him in the holy tongue and even He, when He comes to praise Israel, in the holy tongue He praises them, as it is written Behold, you are beautiful my love, behold you are beautiful" (1968a, v. 2, p. 296).

"*Hûš harêah*" is a story in which the author figures as speaker. He refers to himself as *mêhabbêr*, that is, "author," or more literally, "composer," in the sense of "joiner of words." And it is that very activity of joining words that the story brings up for question, since it is a dispute over linguistic usage that provides the stimulus for the mock-heroic text that we read. Agnon is actually making use here of an annoying incident in which he was censured publicly for incorrect word usage by a member of the national Committee on Language (*va'ad hallašôn*). He writes a story of the author in which language is the central personage. Stylistically, the story is, as Band (1968, p. 229) notes, "deliberately archaic"; each of its seven sections bears a lengthy title that delineates a step in an argument which invokes language, a feminine presence, and draws the relationship between the *mêhabbêr* and language itself.

The first section establishes the priority of language, even to God, and delineates the potency of language through a roster of curative, therapeutic verbs. Because of the particular nature of the Hebrew language, it becomes a moral and spiritual obligation to continue its use: "Therefore all Israel are obliged to take great care with their language that it should be clear and precise, all the more so in the last generation, close to redemption, in order that our true Messiah, may he reveal himself quickly in our time, will hear our language, and we will hear his language" (p. 296). Language is redemptive: to use the holy tongue well is to hasten the time of communal salvation, an invocation of language that implicates the poet in the fate of his people.

The second section takes its stand "Against the Wise Men of the Age Who Write in any Tongue and do not Write in the Holy Tongue"; the *mêhabbêr* goes on to criticize as well those who do use the holy tongue, but whose usage distorts it (p. 296). The "wise men" of the time either "twist" the language even when writing simple words or they write in other languages, neglecting the holy tongue. The verb *mištabbêšim* or "distort" derives, of course, from that highly resonant verb *šbš*, to

“twist” or “make crooked.” The use of *šbš* here goes to the heart of the matter: the holy tongue can be used either to hasten redemption or it can be used wrongfully, with all the metaphysical weight that *mištabbēšim* carries. (In this respect, see Edna Aphek’s study [1979] of significant word roots in Agnon’s writing; as is well known, Agnon also uses the root *šbš* to form the name Shibush by which he designates his hometown of Buczacz.)

These elaborations of possible relations to the holy tongue provide a preface to the imaginative geography of the third section, “The Secret of Writing Stories.”² Here the *mēḥabbēr*—the speaker as writer—situates himself as a carefully defined distance from the Torah, via an elaboration of textual space:

If the Holy Temple were still in existence, I would stand on the rostrum with my brothers the poets and every day I would recite the song that the Levites would recite in the Holy Temple. Now while the Holy Temple is still in its destruction and we have no Priests in their work and no Levites in their songs and their melodies, I occupy myself with Torah and Prophets and with the writings of the Mishnah, with *hālākôt* and *haggādôt*, with the additions to the Mishnah and with the details of Biblical exegesis and the fine points of the Sages. And when I look into their words and see that from all our loveliness of days of old only the memories of words remain to us, I become filled with sorrow. And my heart trembles with that sorrow, and from that trembling I write books of stories, like a man who is exiled from the palace of his father and makes himself a small shelter [*sukkā*] and sits there and tells of the glory of the house of his ancestors (pp. 297–98).

The last sentence of this geographical passage contains the word which literally houses the *mēḥabbēr*: the little *sukkā* or shelter that he makes for himself is defined both through its modesty and through its relation to the “palace” of its linguistic predecessors. It is interesting to note that *sukkā* has a history of usage not only as “hut” or “booth,” but to indicate “sanctuary” or “temple.” Thus while the use of *sukkā* functions ostensibly to acknowledge pious distance, a relationship based on contiguity, it contains within it the move to substitution, the move of metaphor. Wieder (1957) traces the use of “sanctuary” as a metaphor for Scripture, as for example in the parallel between the three divisions of the Bible and the three divisions of the sanctuary; he traces a number of sources which demonstrate this concept of text as structure or structure as text, the word which houses.

2. See discussions of this passage with reference to Agnon’s relation to sacred language in Alter (1969) and Shaked (1986).

But *sukkā* is not only the shelter of the *mēḥabbēr*; it is also the word which forms part of a phrase whose usage brings the *mēḥabbēr* under attack from a grammarian. The phrase is *sukkā mēriḥā* or “the *sukkā* gives off a fragrance”; the verb *mēriḥā* suggests that the *sukkā* actively exudes its scent. (Agnon actually used this phrase in a 1934 story that he wrote for *Dābār*; his usage of the verb was criticized subsequently in *Dābār* by Avronin who wrote as the representative for the *va‘ad hallāšōn*, the national Committee on Language [Bar-Adon, 1977].) By implication, the text sets up a mock-epic battle in which poet confronts *daqdēqān* (grammarian). What is the nature of the poet’s usage? Does it defile language or affirm it? The sonship of the poet is at stake.

Out of fidelity to language, the *mēḥabbēr* considers erasure—undoing the linguistic act which constitutes him as *mēḥabbēr* or word joiner. But, he tells us, when he tried to erase the two words, “the *sukkā* came and its fragrance rose before me until I saw that it really gave off fragrance, and I left things [*dēḥārīm*] the way they were” (p. 298). The *sukkā* asserts itself to confirm the poet’s usage by demonstrating its capacity for fragrant action, prompting the *mēḥabbēr* to leave words (which are things) as they are. *Dābār*, of course, can mean “word” or “thing.” As Handelman (1982, p. 32) puts it: “The Hebrew word was not just an arbitrary designation, but an aspect of the continuous divine creative force itself. . . . Hence *davar* is not simply thing but also action, efficacious fact, event, matter, process.” Agnon’s text thus generates a drama of language in which a word asserts its being and the *mēḥabbēr* is placed in a position in which he can only acknowledge the greater glory of sacred language (an acknowledgement that makes a space, along the way, for his own poetic usage).

In a characteristic paradox, it is the writer’s expression of willingness to sacrifice his poetic text that inaugurates a transformation of the language of the text itself. As the *mēḥabbēr* describes sitting down, in a gesture of piety, to read a holy book, the text imitates the language of creation:

Beautiful was that hour of reading psalms. The lamp stood lit on the table and its light adorned each word and each letter and each vowel and each accent. Opposite it the window was open to the south and the breezes before morning blew outdoors, and the breezes did not put out the light of the lamp and did not tangle with the wick, but they whirled around with the trees and bushes in the garden and a good smell of laurel and dews rose like wild honey and sweet oil (p. 301).

The passage presents an image of luminous textuality: the light of the lamp and the winds that blow through the open window unite the letters

of the text of psalms to the elements of the natural world. In distinct contrast to the behavior of the quarrelsome grammarian, the wind does not “tangle with” or “cause strife” with the wick; rather all the elements dance together in a figure of linguistic harmony. As in *ʿAl ʿeben ʿahat*, the writer’s bow to larger priorities effects a moment of redemption in which word and thing join, and the world is seen as a radiant text.

Acknowledging the priority of language appears to be the condition that makes possible the enactment of a fiction of language in the text. As in *ʿAl ʿeben ʿahat*, *Ḥuṣ harêah* makes a move to present itself to the reader as the history of a predecessor text: in *ʿAl ʿeben ʿahat*, the earlier text became lost in a rock; in this instance, the narrator records his willingness to erase, i.e. lose, the earlier text. Through this maneuver, *Ḥuṣ harêah* displaces the burdens of poetic autonomy onto the earlier text (which is, along the way, cleared of the imputation of linguistic transgression). *Ḥuṣ harêah* is thus a fiction which pretends that it is not a fiction, although its very self-consciousness about language works as a wink to the reader that engages our complicity in the play of the text.

“Righteous Men [*ṣaddiqîm*] from the Garden of Eden Come to Support the *Mēḥabbēr*,” declares the heading to section 5 of the story (p. 299). *Ḥuṣ harêah* provides for something of a family romance as, in a dream, the *mēḥabbēr* recognizes the famous sage R. Yaakov Melisah. “The great men of Torah do not look like their families,” observes the text, thus establishing a new family whose kinship systems are intertextual (p. 300). The figure of the sage, interchangeable with his book, directs the *mēḥabbēr* to a piece of paper marking a passage in the book of the sage; in that passage, the *mēḥabbēr* finds the same phrase for which the grammarian had faulted him. In effect, the sage adopts the *mēḥabbēr* and authorizes his linguistic innovation, by showing that it is already contained in the already written.

The narrator is able to recognize the sage as Rabbi Yaakov Melisah although he resembles no one in his family, because, as with those who “devote themselves to words of Torah,” God has endowed him with a special radiance (p. 300). There is a suggestion of closure of the circle of this family romance in that the *mēḥabbēr* earlier described himself as one who “devotes himself to words of Torah” (p. 297). Through language, the faces of the *mēḥabbēr* and the Rabbi Yaakov Melisah are transfigured into the face of the text, a suggestion of dissolution of distance through participation in the radiance of the holy tongue.

The text draws to an end with a one-sentence paragraph which opens with the “greatness of the holy tongue” and, by means of the bridge of the Righteous Man who journeys from the garden of Eden, reaches its conclusion with acknowledgment of the labors of the artist: “Come and

see how great the holy tongue is, that for the sake of one word a great *ṣaddīq* took the trouble to come from the Academy on High from the garden of Eden and unrolled his book before me and the matter evolved so that I would rise in the night to recite psalms and would find a word" (p. 302).

The title *mēḥabbēr* can designate both the scribe who insures transmission of holy writings and the one who composes original creations; the root *ḥbr* is also used in words denoting forms of social organization. This story is about being a *mēḥabbēr*, but its exploration of that function moves toward suggestions of community where, ultimately, it is language that joins together sages of the past and the figure of the writer. The concluding paragraph of the story establishes a community of those devoted to the holy tongue when it refers to the *ṣaddīq* who journeys from Eden, identified as "the Academy on High" or *yēšībāh šel ma'ālāh*, in order to come to the aid of the *mēḥabbēr*. Agnon's reference to the *yēšībāh šel ma'alah* not only suggests the timeless community of those who devote themselves to Torah, but it replaces the authority of the *va'ad hallāšōn* or Committee on Language (established in 1890) with that of a higher body.

Ḥūš hārēah takes shape around a prior act of linguistic use, but it subsumes that bit of history into a fictional structure that enlarges its context to a timeless realm which includes users of the holy tongue from God to the Rabbi Yaakov Melisah, other members of the Heavenly Academy and, most recently, the *mēḥabbēr*. Agnon's poetic usage, attacked as a distortion of language, is given place in a geography of language use that stretches back to Torah. Thus proof of prior use does not diminish the potency of the present use but rather strengthens it by associating it with earlier strata of language, to a myth of origins where language is presence, word is thing, and the *sukkā* gives off a fragrance in honor of a holy tongue.

Agnon owned an 1858 edition of the *Siddūr derek haḥayyim* of the Rabbi Yaakov Melisah. On page 298, in the section on the laws for observance of *Šābū'ot*, a passage concerning the custom of gathering flowers in honor of *Šābū'ot* refers to flowers which give off a fragrance for the joy of a holy day; the word *mērīhā* ("give off a fragrance") is underlined in pencil. The editor of the *Siddūr derek haḥayyim* refers to himself as the *mēḥabbēr*. One might suggest that Agnon affiliates himself with his predecessor through the adoption of the title for his narrative persona.³

3. Emuna Agnon Yaron notes that it was natural for her father to refer to himself as the *mēḥabbēr* when he was writing about matters of language, in that he saw himself as

"*Al ʿeben ʾaḥat*" and "*Ḥūš hārēaḥ*" are contemporaneous with some of the stories in *Sēper hammaʿāsīm*, a collection that critics have referred to as particularly Kafkaesque. Written during the thirties and forties, it is tempting to contrast the stories in this collection to texts such as "*Al ʿeben ʾaḥat*" and "*Ḥūš hārēaḥ*" by calling them fictions of exclusion. In contrast to "*Al ʿeben ʾaḥat*" and "*Ḥūš hārēaḥ*," the stories of *Sēper hammaʿāsīm* invert what one might term the fiction of inclusion to suggest fictions of exclusion, in which relationship to a predecessor (which is less explicitly identified as sacred writing) functions oppressively. In *Sēper hammaʿāsīm*, texts such as "*Pat šēlēmā*" ("A Whole Loaf") and "*Hattēʿuddāh*" ("The Document") speak their ambivalence to the structure of tradition, as they shrug off the burdens of relationship to the texts of the past. It would be misleading, however, to polarize these two groups of texts excessively by opposing them to one another, for it is more characteristic of the Agnon text generally to oscillate between inside and outside, belonging and not-belonging, in a manner that suggests the marginality of writing.

"*Pat šēlēmā*" ("A Whole Loaf"), written in 1933, enacts a variant of the story of relationship to a predecessor text in its first-person narrator's account of his meeting with Dr. Yekutiel Neeman, whom Kurzweil (1963) identified early on as a Moses figure, faithful servant of God, as his name suggests and, one might add, a prototype of the writer as scribe, one who transcribes what his master passes on to him. In ways that Kurzweil was the first to point out, Agnon provides clues which suggest the divine authorship of Dr. Neeman's book, but he also has his narrator describe Dr. Neeman as a bestselling writer who loves to hear the latest figures on how his book is doing; the narrator's flattery seems scaled more to a popular bestseller than the Word of God and might be said to flatten the predecessor text, by implication the Torah, by bringing its "author" down to the level of our narrator.

When Dr. Neeman gives the narrator some letters to mail for him, that action constitutes transmission of the Word: it suggests reenactment of Moses' passing on the commandments and thus offers the narrator the opportunity to assume his place in the social structure of Judaism. Acceptance of the mission would then indicate acceptance of a "non-authorial" role, renunciation of a personal scripture, one might say. But

continuing the ways of his ancestors (personal communication, 5/31/84). My thanks to Emuna and Hayyim Yaron for the information concerning the *Siddūr derek haḥayyim*.

the narrator of "*Pat šēlēmā*" is also a man who describes himself as being on his own at that time, free of wife and children. (See Holtz, 1971, for a very full account of Agnon's use of allusion in this story.) Dr. Neeman's request clashes with the narrator's intention to find himself a stomach-filling meal, a demand that will be satisfied by nothing less than a "whole loaf." The story recounts the narrator's vacillating approaches to, on the one hand, the post office, whose gates, about to close, bring to mind the heavenly gates at the close of the Day of Atonement and thus signal a call to higher obligations, and, on the other hand, to the restaurant which tantalizes in its promise of fulfillment of more earthly and egoistic demands.

One might approach the story as the elaboration of a conflict between the weighty authority of talmudic tradition and the assertiveness of the modern individual who ends up achieving neither the sanctified whole loaf of Sabbath observance nor the secular, stomach-filling loaf of the restaurant. (See Band, 1968, pp. 199–201.) Rather than images of radiant textuality, we are left with greasy papers that suggest more the emblem of the narrator's soiled intentions.

"*Hattēuddāh*" ("The Document"), written in 1932, centers on the narrator's reluctant efforts to obtain the document that gives the story its title. It is a story that is particularly Kafkaesque in its tension between the individual and a vaguely defined bureaucracy. The narrator receives a call for assistance that is presented so as to emphasize that he will be aiding someone other than himself yet somehow related to him: "My relative so-and-so whom I didn't even know by name wrote to me from a city of which I didn't even know that there was such a one in the world that I should go to that office and get a document for him on which his whole life depended" (1968a, v. 6, p. 114). On the basis of internal evidence, it is possible to suggest an equation of the *tēuddāh*—the "document" that places such a strong moral obligation on the narrator—and the Torah. Indeed, the association of Torah and *tēuddāh* is not new; see, for example, Isaiah 8:16: "Bind up the testimony [*tēuddāh*], seal the teaching [*torah*] among my disciples." There are enough hints in "*Hattēuddāh*" of shared characteristics between *tēuddāh* and Torah to support the identification: the *tēuddāh* is an official document; a whole organization exists in "*Hatteuddāh*" to handle matters pertaining to the word, an organization that can be perceived as a debased and depersonalized form of the priesthood.

The narrator of "*Hattēuddāh*" tells us he spends three days in the "office of the gray bureaucracy" (p. 114), and during that time he is unable to utter the "official" words of the humble supplicant that his

mission necessitates. The physical symptoms that he cites to explain away his immobility center on the speech organs, and thus center the conflict in the use of language. As a first-person narrative, the story contains within it a representation of the act of telling. Thus narration itself becomes implicated in the conflict that the story dramatizes. Through the story of his own ambivalence, the narrator places himself at a distance from the potentially redemptive use of language with which the story opens.

The major novel *ʔŌrēah nātā lālūn* ("A Guest for the Night"), published initially in 1939, raises questions about the status of writing in the modern world, particularly in the context of the relationship of secular texts to sacred, and later texts to their predecessors; it does so, all the more significantly, through its account of the efforts of its first-person narrator, a writer, to go back to his birthplace and repair damages that can be attributed variously to his own youthful rebelliousness, the falling off of faith in the community, and not least of all, the ravages of war. The explicit project of the novel is restoration, on the level of the narrator's own life, as well as that of the Jewish community in the town. The central character, the "Guest" of the novel's title, narrates his own efforts at personal and communal renewal, even as he provides evidence of the contradictions inherent in those efforts that insure their failure.

Sokoloff (1984, p. 105) points out that *ʔŌrēah nātā lālūn* demands active reading, in that the "reader, like the narrator, must contend with disorienting phenomena, and the reader's struggle to devise a new strategy of reading—based on parallelisms—corresponds to the Guest's need to create or perceive coherent new patterns of meaning out of social chaos." One such pattern emerges through study of the attention to writing and questions of textuality in the text. The disrepair of the writer coincides with that of the town: the town used to possess a bookstore with an array of books of useful function and also those amusements called novels; now only the degraded texts that are novels remain and the Guest observes that "Even now they make books they call novels, just as they still call our town a town" (1968a, v. 4, ch. 10). Similarly, the narrator admits reluctantly to being a *sopēr*, acknowledging the degradation implicit in his use of a term that used to designate one who wrote out the words his master dictated to him. His comments set up and underscore a contrast between past wholeness and present decline, a decline that can be attributed to neglect of the central structures of faith. Personal and public missions of repair appear to coincide

in the Guest's intentions to remain in the town, to bring back the former glory of the *bēt hamidraš* and to put back together the fragments of his own life. The Talmudic saying that he cites in this respect condenses his intentions neatly: "If a man does not rebuild the Holy Temple in his lifetime, it is as if he has destroyed it in his lifetime." In the fiction of this first-person novel, the project of restoration implies the rehabilitation of its writer/narrator, the restoration of the *bēt hamidraš* and, by implication, the transformation of the text that we read—the account of that multi-faceted restoration—into a life-giving instrument.

Through a seemingly minor motif involving a question as to the authenticity of a manuscript, *Yādāv šel mōše* or "Hands of Moses," the novel engages questions of authorship and the power of writing, particularly the power of a later text or transcription, as opposed to that of an earlier or original text. The manuscript "Hands of Moses" had long been used as an amulet to aid in difficult childbirths. When two old women come to see the Guest to ask him to sell the manuscript, since the dying town, in which births no longer occur, has no need of it, he notes its medicinal odor and stained pages, tangible evidence of its life-giving history, but feels some discomfort with it: it does not strike him as being the authentic manuscript, written by the hand of the sage, and indeed, thumbing through it, he discovers that it is a transcription, carried out by a disciple. How can a manuscript that is not original possess the life-giving powers of the original, he wonders. The question may seem a bit forced. My suggestion is that the issue is raised so as to bring to the fore the question of the potency of texts, originals and copies.

The question of whether this manuscript is the original or a copy parallels the motif of the key in the novel: the narrator accepts the key to the *bēt hamidraš* as a sign of his restorative mission, but then loses it and has to have a substitute key made. The motifs of manuscript and key converge when the women of the town, trying to help a young woman in labor, come to the narrator in search first of a manuscript, but when that cannot be found, in search of a succession of keys, which brings them ultimately to the Guest's substitute key; it is this last in the series, the substitute key to the *bēt hamidraš*, that enables the birth to take place.

Now, of course, the young woman in question is Rachel, the inn-keeper's daughter, in whom the narrator has an interest. Her pregnancy is the first to occur in many years in the town that has been bereft of its men, and thus it raises at least the possibility of new life in the dying town. A confluence of narrative strategies, including the Guest's *sotto*

voce expressions of illicit interest in Rachel, provide a subplot which casts the newborn infant as the Guest's production, and implies an answer to the question of the novel: Can a later substitute work as well as a lost original?

Ultimately, it is the substitute key (the later text, one might say) which eases the labor of the young woman who gives birth to a child who is the Guest's namesake and spiritual heir. Through the substitution of key for manuscript in the context of Rachel's labor, the text produces a fiction of inclusion. The later substitute—the key—shares in the life-giving capacities of the earlier text which was itself a substitute, that is, a transcription of an even earlier text. Through the substitution of key for manuscript, the equivalency between them moves into the foreground. As a result, questions of manuscript authenticity and originality blur; distinctions between earlier and later, original and copy, recede in importance in light of a more generalized fiction of textuality that endows even latter-day copies of lost originals with life-giving potencies. Indeed, I think we can even speculate that the series of substitutions involving manuscript, copy of manuscript, key and substitute key is meant to extend even further to suggest the restorative properties of the first-person account of a year's journey of renewal that is the novel.

In both *ʔŌrēah nāṭā lālūn* and in the short story "*Pat šēlēmā*", the question of the authenticity of a predecessor text arises. In each, the power of the prior text is unquestioned; that is, both Dr. Neeman's book and the manuscript "Hands of Moses" are credited with the capacity to do good in the world. In *ʔŌrēah nāṭā lālūn*, doubts about manuscript authenticity work together with the proven capacity of the very manuscript in question to relieve suffering in a manner that creates support for the possibility that a later text can share in the potency of its predecessors. That is, the story in the novel of the manuscript "Hands of Moses" contributes to the mythologizing of language—the attempt to renew lost, mythic potencies—that is central to the narrator's quest.

But issues of creativity and the role of the creator in the novel are complex and not without some important contradictions. The Guest marvels at the creative capacities of Schuster the tailor to give form to cloth: "There is something marvelous about this cloth, which the tailor has cut. Yesterday it was formless; now he has passed his scissors over it, and cut it and given it a form" (1968b, ch. 13). Similarly, he endows the locksmith with the divinity of creation: "The locksmith kept his promise and made me a key. I took the key and said: Yesterday you were a lump of iron; the craftsman cast his eyes upon you and made you into a precious thing" (1968b, ch. 22). The Guest extends this form-giving capacity to his relationship to the *bet hamidraš*, but it is significant that

in this instance, he reverses the subject-object relation: "Similarly, I said to myself: Yesterday you were a lump of flesh; now the *Beit midrash* has been opened to you and you have become a man" (1968b, 22). One might have expected him to cast himself in a role analogous to that of the tailor or the locksmith whose powers he so admires; instead, he likens himself to the inert material which the craftsman shapes.

There is a central ambiguity here: On the one hand, through his return to the House of Study, he will become the infant *in utero* who knows the entirety of the Torah—an image of wholeness or oneness with the text of Torah that is lost at birth.⁴ Return thus figures as absorption into a prior text. Were the guest to complete the return he has initiated, there would be no novel. Of course, the return remains incomplete: despite the regressive pull of the intra-uterine fantasy of the wise infant, the Guest preserves his guesthood; furthermore, as Shagiv-Feldman (1982) has noted, his key serves more to close than to open doors.

On the other hand, the Guest casts himself as creator through the subplot of Rachel and Yeruham. The child comes into the world through the mediation of the substitute key that the Guest provides; the child bears the name of the Guest and also, in the Guest's eyes, incarnates the legendary wise infant who possesses *in utero* the entirety of the Torah. Thus the infant's birth suggests that new life has come to the town through the Guest's mediation (and indeed the Guest's designation as godfather corroborates his part in the process). Even further, though, as the Guest's namesake, the infant assumes an equivalence to the Guest that suggests that the latter has achieved the rebirth he had come back to his birthplace to accomplish. Through this birth, then, the narrative suggests that the Guest has become his own life-giving text and given birth to himself.⁵ This is the culmination of the imagery of rebirth and the attempt of the text to go beyond itself, to retrieve a lost linguistic capacity. And yet, here too the move remains incomplete. The novel makes clear the absurd grandiosity of the Guest's usurpation: the Guest may replace God's text with his own, but the world of the fiction empties those narrative gestures of potency in its testimony to the persistence of tragedy, of disrepair in the world. (See Shaked, 1973, p. 236.)

The text achieves neither the silence that is absorption back into a prior text, nor does it transcend itself to become the life-giving text. Rather it positions itself in the space between. The product of that

4. See Feldman (1982) and Hoffman (1982) for further discussion of the wise infant motif.

5. This offers an example of what Paul de Man (1979, p. 63) calls the "totalizing stability of metaphorical processes."

double move is the ironic text. Ironic structure poses limits that defeat opposing tendencies toward either usurpation of the sacred space of the prior text or faceless absorption back into it. Thus while the novel may testify to its failure, its distance from its predecessors, that acknowledgment of distance constitutes also the reiteration of connection: the text situates itself in the margins, in a manner that suggests both inclusion in and exclusion from traditional structures.

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