

Agnon and Bialik: A lifelong friendship

By Mordechai Beck

IN 1934, Shmuel Yosef Agnon, then 46, wrote a story “In the Heart of the Seas” to be included in a *Festschrift* [a book honoring a respected person] for Hayim Nahman Bialik on the poet’s 60th birthday. The collection was called *Sefer Bialik*, and it came out the year that Bialik died.

The story, set in the 19th century, concerns a group of elderly hassidic Jews coming to Eretz Israel by boat from Europe. Most of the people arrive and have trouble acclimatizing. Some of them indeed go back to Europe. But another, somewhat mythical, figure misses the boat at one of the ports and instead of staying behind in Constantinople, takes his handkerchief, spreads it out on the sea and, sitting on it like Aladdin’s flying carpet, wafts over the Mediterranean to land miraculously in Eretz Israel. Meanwhile, the other travelers are on their boat thinking about their friend whom they had left behind, when they suddenly see something floating out on the sea. Ultimately, they realize that it is their friend, who had arrived in Eretz



Shmuel Yosef Agnon in 1966



Hayim Nahman Bialik in 1923

clear hint at Bialik, who was often known by his initials, *Het, Nun* (Hayim Nachman). Chananya is Bialik, and he is inserted into the narrative to remind the new immigrants that without poetry, mystery, aggadah, without spirit, there is nothing. Without Shabbat, we won’t last as a nation. So that the figure in the story is Agnon’s tribute to Bialik, his lifelong friend. Agnon’s story was awarded the Bialik Prize – the most prestigious literary prize in the country at that time.

Yisrael before them. By the time they arrive in Jaffa, he’s already settled in Jerusalem and, unlike everyone else, he thrives. Many of this group had left the good life in Europe in order to struggle in Eretz Yisrael. But this other fellow, the miracle worker, only succeeds.

Agnon’s story implies that you had to do practical things to establish a country, such as building roads. But you could not forget the *aggadah*, the spirit. His miraculous flying figure is called Chananya. According to the novel interpretation of Jeffrey Saks, director of research at Agnon House in Jerusalem, this is a

To celebrate Bialik’s 150th birthday, Beit Agnon in Jerusalem’s Talpiot district, has now put on a modest exhibition of these two giants of modern Hebrew letters – one of prose, the other of poetry. This includes letters, books inscribed with dedications, pens, and even eyeglasses. The focus of the exhibition in Beit Agnon is on the friendship between the two writers. Curated by Saks and Asaf Ofek, it is a timely reminder of how Hebrew became the official language of Israel – not an entirely foregone conclusion. What connected these



Curator Jeffrey Saks and Author Haim Be’er at the exhibition at Agnon House in Jerusalem.



Visitors to the exhibition, which is open until the end of May.



Bialik's eyeglasses and pen.

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of Israel. Bialik sees this young man, who is all of 20 years old, the young author from Galicia about whom he had heard so much. Agnon accompanies him around Palestine and shows him the settlements of the pioneers. He spent a number of weeks traveling with Bialik, presumably to be in the shadow of the most significant man of Hebrew letters at that time. Agnon knew what Bialik could do for him. He had not yet met Salman Schocken, who was to become his great patron. Then, as fate would have it, they find themselves living in proximity to each other in Germany for three years.

two writers was their insistence on the right type of Hebrew – one that was rooted in the language of the tradition but flexible enough to be usable in a modern context. It is not that they laid out an academic program, but rather, through their creative work, they were able to show how such a language could be applied to any situation in a contemporary environment. Agnon's modern language is indeed a beautifully stylized artifact. No one speaks Agnon-ish Hebrew, but it is clearly rooted in biblical, and even more so, in Mishnaic and rabbinic Hebrew.

Ten years earlier, on the fast day of the Tenth of Tevet, Bialik's birthday, Agnon, aged 36, and 15 years younger than the national poet, sent a letter to Bialik from Germany, addressing him as "Our Master Bialik," relating how he had received Bialik's letter and that it had "enchanted me the whole day because I never thought that you should write such a letter to me." After blessing him with his "heart and soul," he complained that "we miss you here in Bad Homburg." For three years, Bialik and Agnon had been neighbors in the German city, and during that period their friendship had blossomed. They had gone on daily walks together and were in constant conversation. "Homburg is so boring without you, and my daughter (who was about three at the time) mentions you all the time!"

Bialik had no children of his own, though he had a great love of children and saw their great importance in this whole cultural project that he was part of.

In October 1908, 15 years before the above letter was written, Sh. Ben-Zion published Agnon's "Agunot" story in the journal *Omer*. The added importance of the story is that it provided Agnon with his pen name, which became his actual name.

Less than a year after having published "Agunot," the young Agnon met Bialik for the first time. It was Bialik's first visit to the Land

In 1924, Agnon came to live in Israel for the second time. He has a wife and two young children. Instead of returning to Jaffa, where he had spent his first sojourn, he went to Jerusalem, and simultaneously returned to traditional observance which he had abandoned, like almost every other young man in the second aliyah. Bialik came at the same time, but moved to Tel Aviv and built his grand home on Rehov Bialik. He was so famous that the Tel Aviv Municipality renamed the street after him. For the next 10 years, the two giants of Hebrew letters retained their relationship, although the distance between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv was much more difficult than it is today. They communicated mainly by letter.

In some ways, Agnon was the opposite of Bialik. Agnon was focused on a particular form of the art of writing. He had a patron, Schocken, and unlike most other artists, did not have to earn anything else. He also never seemed to have suffered from writer's block. If he got stuck, he'd put the manuscript aside and pull it out at a later date. He would then start something else. He had a long career as a writer. He died aged 82, and until his final year of his life, when he suffered a stroke, he was writing. Even after his stroke left him without speech, he somehow was able to communicate with his daughter on how to finish his writing and what to do with his unpublished work. These were produced after his death, more material than he had published during his lifetime.

In Bialik's house in Tel Aviv, there is something that looks like the breastplate of the High Priest of the Temple with 12 precious stones. Bialik's 12 stones, designed by the house's former archivist, Shmuel Avneri, indicate the areas of influence in creativity and leadership which the poet had. He was a poet, a prose writer, a public speaker, a translator of modern Western literature, an editor, a publisher and a writer of children's literature. Some of his children's books are in the current exhibition, with dedications to Agnon's two children.



Agnon's entrance ticket to Bialik's funeral in Tel Aviv. (July 16, 1934)

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He was also an anthologist, such as his *Sefer HaAggadah*, in which he brings many rabbinic sayings into a more digestible form. His goal was to create a Hebrew culture that meant studying the classic Hebrew literature, such as the Mishna, which was the last great cultural work produced by Jewish people in the Land of Israel. It did not matter to him if you kept the Halacha. Agnon also compiled a collection called *Yamim Noraim*, a best-selling anthology of the classical works on the Days of Awe. He also anthologized a number of traditional Hassidic tales with Martin Buber, which went up in flames when his house on Bad Homburg was burnt down in 1924.

Bialik carried out research in Hebrew. He supported other Hebrew writers. Both Agnon and Bialik were trustees of funds set up by Schocken to support other Hebrew writers and artists, handing out stipends or loans.

Both men had a deep commitment to Judaism, although their forms of observance differed. Bialik had very strong feelings about Shabbat in the public sphere, even though he himself was not traditionally observant. In 1927 he launched Oneg Shabbat, an organization in Tel Aviv which was then copied all over the country. It included cultural events, speeches, lectures, and public singing. Because of the demand, they built the Ohel Shem auditorium in Tel Aviv, which could seat 1,200 people.

Saks observed that for both writers. Hebrew wasn't dead but was in a coma, awaiting, like sleeping beauty, Prince Charming's kiss. When in 1966 he won the Nobel Prize for literature, Agnon spoke at the ceremony in Sweden. In Saks's words, Agnon was telling his audience that the Jewish response to catastrophe is creativity – that's what you are rewarding me for. ■

The exhibition, 'My Master Bialik—My Dear Agnon' is on display at Agnon House, 16 Klausner Street, Jerusalem, through the end of May.