

Tablet

Follow the Goat

Why the Israeli writer S.Y. Agnon still matters

BY JONATHAN ROSEN | Sep 9, 2008 1:34 PM



For my bar mitzvah, a friend of my parents, a Jewish writer, gave me a small bundle of books that included a collection of tales by S.Y. Agnon. In those days I did not wonder much about the authors of the books I read. A friend had given me *The Hobbit* and I didn't know or much care that Tolkien was British, that his dark vision was shaped by a world war, that aspects of his imaginary world drew on Norse mythology. I merely plunged into the story of a small furry creature who follows a wizard and defeats a dragon.

It was the same with Agnon. I once read an interview with I.B. Singer⁽¹⁾ where he talked about reading Dostoyevsky at the age of nine and simply assuming that Dostoyevsky—despite the anti-Semitism, or perhaps even because of it—was a Yiddish writer. This is how I read Agnon—I did not worry about translation, linguistic or cultural barriers. I did not think about Biblical, Mishnaic, Hasidic reverberations, or modern Hebrew interpolations. I just read. And so his stories entered through the same door that Tolkien and Dostoyevsky enter when you read them as teenagers, which is actually the only door literature ought to go through, at least in the beginning.

Agnon's stories stirred very strong, disturbing feelings in me. Looking back, I recognize these emotions as tinged with a nascent historical and religious and political awakening, though I didn't recognize or have a name for this at the time. It was the dreamlike force of the stories that

gripped me. In one, a man was looking for his father in a town where he no longer lived, Pesach was coming, the sun was going down, time and space were bent. I felt deep anxiety and displacement and longing without knowing why.

These stories stayed with me for many years, most especially the famous story, "Fable of the Goat," about the boy who follows a magical goat that leads him from his shtetl straight to the Land of Israel. The boy in the story follows this goat through a cave and comes out near Tzfat. He is so delighted he decides to stay. He sends the goat back to his father with a note tucked in its ear saying, essentially, "Follow the goat." But the father fails to find the note, and, in grief and rage, butchers the animal. Only after the goat is dead does the little piece of paper fall out with its messianic message. The shortcut—and perhaps the bond between the father and son—is lost forever.

This story struck me with tragic force, even though rereading it I recognize now it is half-ironic, a sort of aliyah joke, as well as a serious mystical meditation.

But I first read this story without thinking of any of the things I would make myself think about now—the binding of Isaac, the way Jacob fooled his father with a goatskin and was in turn fooled with the blood of a goat, or the undertow of Hasidic mysticism and the overtone of Kafka's parable "Before the Law," with its infinite waiting. Reading it at thirteen, there was a human ache, a Jewish ache that stirred in me, ignorant as I was. As I got older, the story of the goat merged with a story I had long known about my own father.

My father went to Israel in 1954 to visit his sister, who had made aliyah in the 1930s. My father, who had grown up in Vienna visiting Herzl's grave, announced that he was just going home to New York to pack his suitcase and would then return to Israel to live. He did not return to Israel for thirty years, when he was in his sixties, and I was in college.

The reasons why my father didn't return are less important—at least for the purpose of this essay—than the fact that Agnon's simple fable had already taught me something about going to Israel. Later, when I read Agnon's novel *Sippur Pashut*—though I read it in English as *A Simple Story*—I recognized how good Agnon was at simple stories that wind up teaching you that in fact there are no simple stories.

In his great novel *Only Yesterday—T'mol Shilshom*—a character filled with Zionist dreams makes aliyah only to have every illusion painfully beaten out of him, much as Don Quixote, his head full of novels of chivalry, sets out on his romantic road only to receive beating after beating.

Agnon's luckless hero is harried by crazy Orthodox Jews and cheated by philistine Godless Jews and brutalized by the weather and by his own romantic delusions about the land. With Zionism like that, I thought, who needs post-Zionism? Or at least I should say that Agnon made me realize that even after you went to the land, you were still traveling there, still making a sort of journey that never stopped. It was a simultaneously gloomy and oddly uplifting discovery, to know that Israelis were also in a constant process of aliyah, much as all Jews are constantly choosing to be Jewish even after three thousand years of being chosen.

But by now I could no longer overlook the fact that Agnon wrote in the born-again language of the Jewish people. And I could not ignore the fact that I was cut off from the central element of his writing. The triumph—almost the punch line—of *Only Yesterday* is that it is written in Hebrew. This Jewish Don Quixote remains in the land of his dream, and, lo and behold, it is no dream, as the Hebrew account of his adventures attests. (Actually, he's destroyed by a mad dog, but that's another story.)

And so now I come to my great shame, of which Agnon is a constant reminder.

There is no magic tunnel that can lead me to Agnon; translation may look like one, but it leads you to a different place altogether. You have to take the long way around in reading Agnon, but my Hebrew stinks, despite many years of trying to learn it. And even if it didn't stink, it would be inadequate. And so I can only circle Agnon without ever quite arriving. I take some tiny comfort in the observation occasionally made to me that "even most Israelis can't understand Agnon anymore." There are, after all, multiple forms of literacy—and illiteracy. But that is very small comfort indeed.

I remember when *The New York Times* asked me to review *Only Yesterday*—when it was finally translated, by Barbara Harshav, in 2000. I was delighted and at the same time I felt, even more than is customary when reviewing a book, a deep sense of fraudulence. I kept thinking about Virginia Woolf's essay "On Not Knowing Greek." I can really only speak about not-knowing Agnon.

But there are lots of things I don't really *know* that I speak about—maybe the most important things in life. And I've come to the conclusion that if one always waited for mastery before blundering out into the field, not only would it be impossible to be a writer, or a parent, or a believer in God—I don't think one could actually be Jewish. Agnon, easily mistaken as a touchstone of linguistic and religious and cultural authenticity, after all invented himself and took his very name from one of his own stories.



He was born Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes in 1888 in the town of Buczacz in eastern Galicia. Though he spoke Yiddish and studied traditional Hebrew and Aramaic texts, he was tutored in German as a child and gained early access to European culture. He claimed to have been born on the ninth of Av, the traditional anniversary of the destruction of both the first and second Temple, weaving brokenness into his very birth and pointing the way for the repair effected by his move to Palestine in 1907. On his father's side he was linked to Hasidic culture but his mother was descended from mitnagdim, rationalist doubters of the ecstatic tradition of religious Judaism. Though devoted to Jewish scholarship, he was early on affected by the nascent currents of Zionism that often ran counter to the steadfast life of a traditional Jew. In short, his traditionalism was riven by the contradictions and tensions of modern Jewish life.

His first published work in Israel, "Agunot," which first appeared in 1908, derives its name from the Hebrew word *agunah*, describing the condition of a woman who cannot get divorced because the whereabouts of her husband are unknown. She is thus "chained" (in the literal meaning of the word), though legally, and in some sense spiritually, she floats unmoored in a world that no longer has a traditional place for her. Agnon, especially once he moved to Palestine, saw himself inhabiting a similar condition.

Without realizing all this it's easy to let Agnon terrify you, since he seems to carry on his back the entire weight of unbroken tradition. But Agnon was himself a living embodiment of many of the contradictions of Jewish life.

Still, the world often took him as he presented himself at the Nobel ceremony in 1966, a stooped man with his head traditionally covered, reciting before the King of Sweden the blessing one is commanded to say on standing before a king, and claiming in his speech that people see in his work the influence of "authors whose names, in my ignorance, I have not even heard."

It's been instructive for me to discover how uncomfortable Agnon seems to have made other Jewish writers. There is the famous story Saul Bellow^[2] tells in his introduction to *Great Jewish Short Stories* about his meeting in Jerusalem with Agnon. Agnon is very keen to know if Bellow has been translated into Hebrew because only then, as Agnon explains, will Bellow be safe, preserved in the only tongue that ultimately matters.

Bellow appears to be laughing along with Agnon, but in fact his revenge is swift. In the same volume, introducing Agnon's story "The Kerchief," Bellow says of Agnon: "Entirely immersed in Hebrew and Yiddish literature, he apparently has little interest in Western literary traditions." Bellow wrote this in 1963, just three years before Agnon received the Nobel Prize—and thirteen years before he himself won. The falseness of this comment is staggering, especially from Bellow, who surely knew better. Even if Bellow had not read Agnon's correspondence—in which he asks his patron Zalman Schocken for a copy of *The Song of Roland* and rhapsodizes about Flaubert—a brief sampling of Agnon's works brings its Western literary elements home, however braided through they are with Jewish sources.

It is as if Bellow—who, after all, wrote *To Jerusalem and Back*—needed to persuade himself that Agnon's world and his own could not really overlap. That it was well and good that the goat, and even the dream of the goat, was dead. Bellow's American security somehow depended on it.

The same thing happened when I was talking once to Alfred Kazin^[3], the great American Jewish literary critic and author of the landmark study of American literature *On Native Grounds*. In passing, Kazin mentioned to me that his daughter was living in Israel.

"Well," I said, "She's really on native ground!"

Kazin flew into a rage. For him—and he was born in 1915, the same year as Bellow—the idea that native ground might not be where his own feet rested, and where his immigrant parents had toiled to belong, was too threatening, too anxiety provoking.

Even Isaac Bashevis Singer was made uncomfortable by Agnon—though perhaps it makes sense that a Yiddish writer would squirm a little at the prospect of a modern Hebrew one. I.B. Singer's son, Israel Zamir, tells a story in his memoir about going with his father to the 92nd Street Y to hear Agnon speak. It was 1967, the eve of the Six Day War. After Agnon's reading, Singer remarked to his son, "Too bad there aren't any translators so his books could be distributed widely."

It's one thing for the Nobel committee, in its citation to Agnon, to offer the unwittingly insulting observation that Agnon's work "has gradually penetrated linguistic barriers which, in this case, are particularly obstructive." It's another thing for the two other Jewish literary giants, both headed for the Nobel Prize, to feel a similar sense of obstruction and impossibility.

But these questions of language, like questions of national identity, are intimately bound up with Agnon's work, and he would hardly have been surprised by them. And my fascination with them, and with Agnon, only grew stronger as I myself became a writer and wondered about the role of Jewish identity not merely in my life but in my writing life. In America, the pattern of Jewish writing established by critics like Kazin and novelists like Bellow was one of sailing out into the open culture of America from a Jewish immigrant origin that receded forever behind you. But a younger generation of Jewish writers has recognized that the journey back to Jewish identity, or at least to Jewish consciousness, is an equally heroic journey. And for this journey Agnon also has a contribution to make.

Consider his novel *A Guest for the Night*, published in 1939: In it a typically Agnonian character returns to his Galician town from the Land of Israel in the vain hope of making contact with some living element of Diaspora culture. Reading *A Guest for the Night* in college, I realized that for Agnon it was a sorrow not only that those in the Diaspora had no shortcut to the Land of Israel, but that those in the Land of Israel had no shortcut to the Diaspora. The Holocaust—or, in the case of *A Guest for the Night*, the First World War—made the reverse journey impossible. But that doesn't mean it wasn't a dream for Agnon.

Although at the end of *A Guest for the Night* the narrator returns to Palestine with the key to the Beit Midrash in his suitcase, that doesn't mean that Agnon didn't dream of opening that lost Diaspora door as much as he dreamed of passing through a modern Zionist gate.

More and more I've been moved to think about what a lonely figure Agnon seems. And how true he is to his self-invented name—an *agunah*, someone neither in one world or the other. But, in a way, that might make him more accessible to the inhabitants of different worlds, not less, even if we have to work together to interpret him, and to repossess him.

We no longer should be asking whether it is in the Diaspora or Israel that the key resides. Israel exists. European Jewry is gone forever but American Jewry isn't going anywhere soon.

We should be trying to open up that cave again. It is perhaps more urgent than ever that we follow Agnon's goat—in both directions.

I've passed through many phases in my thoughts about Agnon but am perhaps thrown back most often on my earliest experience of him. If Agnon taught me that all simple stories are in reality complex, he also teaches—as all great writers do—that no matter how complex a story is, it also endures at a level of simplicity. Searching for my European-born father, who is no longer alive, and for my Israeli relatives—who are very much alive but who nevertheless elude me at times in mysterious ways—I return to that simple childhood fable about the goat. I feel more than ever that primal longing to belong, to stand in a place where all my worlds are joined.

And I feel that, much as Agnon lives in a world beyond my grasp, I need him more than ever.

Article printed from Tablet Magazine: <http://www.tabletmag.com>

URL to article: <http://www.tabletmag.com/arts-and-culture/books/980/follow-the-goat/>

URLs in this post:

[1] I.B. Singer: <http://nextbook.org/cultural/author.html?id=380>

[2] Saul Bellow: <http://nextbook.org/cultural/author.html?id=31>

[3] Alfred Kazin: <http://nextbook.org/cultural/author.html?id=202>

[Click here to print.](#)