UNSETTLING JEWISH KNOWLEDGE

Text, Contingency, Desire

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Chapter 1

The Unreasonable Economy of Martyrdom in S. Y. Agnon's "Holocaust Fiction"

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> Agnon is a writer who, for all his deep roots, is unmistakably ironic, unsettling, and thoroughly modern.
>
> —Adam Kirsch

How "reasonable" is martyrdom? Apparently highly so, to judge by a long Western tradition—from classical antiquity, Jewish Hellenism, and early Christianity through the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Middle Ages—that revered martyrdom, in practice and theory, as "noble" or "beautiful." Indeed, the allure of this ideal has not lost its power in modern times. It has been kept alive in new forms, such as nationalized freedom fighters and devout suicide bombers of different creeds and colors, as well as in a vast corpus of scholarship that has closely studied the history and textual expression of "noble death" from antiquity to the present.

One of the major issues preoccupying this scholarly literature is the link between the practice and theory of this concept in the religious past and its so-called secular phase in modern national cultures. Jewish tradition holds a special place within this field of inquiry because of its long history, its early literary expression of the martyric allure (predated only by classical Greek literature), and its recent ostensible transposition from a "religious" existence

to a national, partly secular, political entity. Indeed, one of the major findings of my book *Glory and Agony: Isaac's Sacrifice and National Narrative* is the degree to which attitudes to heroism and death in battle of so-called modern, secular Hebrew culture are suffused with religious overtones, perceptions, and literary figures.[1] Moreover, recent research has shown the influence of Christian art, from the Renaissance onward, on both visual and literary art production by secular Jews from pre-state Israel to the present time.[2]

This chapter extends my earlier inquiry by delving into the post-Holocaust literary work of Israel's Nobel Prize-winning author, S. Y. Agnon (1887–1970). Agnon's work is an ideal test case for a literary inquiry into Jewish martyrdom both past and present because of the special position he occupies within the ostensible religious/secular rift of the modern Jewish experience. Growing up in an observant family in a Jewish shtetl in Central Europe (Galicia) but turning "secular" after emigrating to Ottoman Palestine as a pioneer in 1908, he changed his mind again in midlife (1924),[3] when he returned fully to his roots and proceeded to observe the Jewish ritual commandments for the rest of his life. Yet this devout adherence to Jewish law did not prevent him from eventually becoming both Hebrew's highly lauded arch-modernist author and the equally revered creator of "traditionalist" fiction. Add his personal losses in the Holocaust—not only his own family but also his entire hometown were decimated early on—and Agnon's literary take on the meaning, value, or rationale of martyrdom gains on a profound significance.

Yet before we decipher this significance, we must take a brief detour through the landscape of historical martyrdom, guided by this simple question: What is the source of the fascination that martyrdom has held over its practitioners since the dawn of culture? Is this fascination "reasonable"? In other words, what is the rationale or "economy" of martyrdom, past and present? Is it indeed a reasonably calculated system of reward and punishment, as defined and theorized by the French school of modern sociology since the dawn of the twentieth century?[4]

The basic answer to this question is quite straightforward. Martyrdom may be best understood as a deviation from the "normal" contract or "rules of exchange" between Man and God that the ancient Romans called *do ut des*: I give You so that You may give (me). Ordinarily, this law of economic exchange pertains to giving (something) *of* oneself and assumes that the "giver" would live on to benefit from this act. The ancients recognized, however, that under great duress such partial giving may not suffice. Extreme

cases call for a total giving *up* of self—of life—to keep the bargain going. So, then, who would reap the benefit in this case? Obviously, the community (namely, "the common good"), the individual in the afterlife, or both. Herein lies the rationale or the "reasonable economy"—and hence the glorification—of martyrdom or noble death in all its varieties.

The logic and efficacy of this "reasonable" exchange were put under strain, however, as early as in ancient Greece. The earliest "deconstruction" of the classical tradition of glorified military heroic death may belong to Euripides, especially in his play *Iphigenia in Aulis* (405 B.C.E).[5] Against the background of ten thousand Hellenic soldiers impatiently waiting to cross the Euripus Strait for their moment of glory or heroic death (as immortalized by Homer several centuries earlier), the "modern" playwright of the time startlingly usurps that moment of glory for Iphigenia, who, by her sex/gender alone, would have habitually been considered fit only for the role of the sacrificial victim in classical Greece. By allowing her to exercise her free will and *choose* to die "for the good of the people" like any honorable (male) Greek citizen-soldier would do, Euripides erases a deeply entrenched cultural gender difference. At the same time, the lofty rhetoric of the long monologue he puts in Iphigenia's mouth sounds somewhat hollow, at least to modern ears, thus raising doubts about the reasonableness of the whole endeavor: "The entire Greek army is dependent on me. . . . Only thus will barbarians never again steal Greek women from their homes. My death shall bring these things to pass. I shall be known as the woman who set Greece free. . . . I give my life for Greece. Sacrifice me and destroy Troy. That will be my epitaph for eternity. That will be my glory, my marriage, my children."[6] This early questioning notwithstanding, both Judaism and Christianity, and later Islam, enthusiastically adopted the Greek idea and practice of noble martyric death in both its active (military) and passive (martyric) forms.[7] Yet despite this debt, it is not a Greek female trope that has come to symbolize the idea of martyrdom in the monotheistic West. This role was accorded to the biblical story of the *'Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac, as narrated in Genesis 22 and in its offshoots in Christianity and Islam. Remarkably, despite the differences in their interpretations of this archetypal martyric trope, all three monotheistic traditions share an insistence on the harmonious cooperation between father and son, thereby obliterating the violence and pain involved in ancient practices of human sacrifice and martyrdom.

A challenge to this acceptance can be detected in the Renaissance, especially in the startlingly negative approach present in some of the visual

imaginings of this emblematic scene. Beginning in the early 1400s and reaching an apex two centuries later in Caravaggio's notable 1603 painting of this motif, the so-called sacrifice of Isaac slowly became the focal point for a debate over devotional pain.[8] Calling attention both to the physicality of the son's fear and pain—the biblical and kabbalistic concept of "*paḥad Yitzḥak*" (Isaac's fear)[9]—and to the father's violence, artists began to visualize the hurt and traumatized human body rather than the elation of the spirit. In subsequent centuries, this visual challenge, perhaps even denial, of the reasonable economy of the "noble death" attracted followers in both arts and letters—from Handel and Mozart to Kant and Kafka, not to mention post–World War II thinkers from Buber to Girard.[10]

Yet the economic exchange of martyrdom/self-sacrifice had its champions too, from Kierkegaard to Bataille and Derrida.[11] More recently, the US scholar Geoffrey Harpham joined the fray in an article titled "Trading Pain for Knowledge, or: How the West Was Won."[12] This title seems to assume a causal relation contrary to the one suggested in Ecclesiastes 1:18: "For in the abundance of wisdom there is an abundance of vexation, so that he who increases knowledge increases pain." According to Harpham, the reverse is true: he who increases pain increases knowledge. Not surprisingly, Harpham takes his cue from the realm of Christianity, citing its ascetic tradition from Saint Athanasius to the popularly canonized Simone Weil.[13] Yet it is not this religious tradition per se that is at the center of his interest. Although he leans heavily on Christian martyrs of old, Harpham is concerned with the rise of the *scholar* as "Holy Man."[14] Arguing that "the West was won" by a (Foucauldian?) trinity of pain–knowledge–power that secularists seem to have inherited from Christianity,[15] and flying in the face of recent detractors who denigrated the martyric economy, Harpham suggests that modern scientists and scholars inherited from Christian saints and martyrs an economy in which they trade pain for knowledge: "A generation ago, the subject was knowledge and power; today, the subject is knowledge and pain."[16]

The Jewish world has been no less divided on this issue. Highly valued from antiquity on, *kiddush ha-shem* (literally, "Sanctification of the Name"; namely, Jewish martyrdom), was famously subjected to critique and rejection by the end of the nineteenth century, if not earlier, especially in the discourse of the emerging Jewish nationalisms and self-defense movements.[17] Despite this rejection, the emblematic image of the martyric tradition, the 'Akedah, was reinvented in Jewish Palestine as early as 1919 as *the* emblem of secular martyrdom; namely, of glorious death in battle for the sake of the

nation.[18] As such, it flew in the face of a Jewish interpretive tradition that reads Genesis 22 as a *survival* story—because Isaac is not actually sacrificed in the end—and hence as a principled denial of the necessity for an enacted human sacrifice.[19] Thus, despite its well-known critique of medieval Jewry, early Zionism followed the martyric tradition of postbiblical Judaism by transforming Isaac into a *fully enacted* human self-sacrifice.

However, during what may be called the first Zionist century (1880–1980),[20] attitudes toward Isaac and the 'Akedah as representations of national self-sacrifice underwent a double transformation: from *glory* to *agony* to *agon*. It was during this period's latter two stages—roughly from the mid-1940s to the 1980s—that the "*un*reasonable" economy of martyric pain in the 'Akedah was often thematized, as authors and artists attempted to voice the excruciating bodily ravages of the "sacrificial victims" and the inglorious suffering of the dead and the drowned.[21] In the wake of the Holocaust, both the historical kiddush ha-shem and the 'Akedah became focal points of disagreement between traditional and secularist wings of Judaism, gaining praise or denigration accordingly.[22]

It is in the context of this disagreement that I read S. Y. Agnon's take on classic Jewish martyrdom in his so-called Holocaust fiction, those works composed mostly during and after World War II that were inspired by or deal directly with the Holocaust (more about this later). I suggest that it was precisely the apparent continuity or equivalence between sacred and secular triads of "pain–knowledge–power" that Agnon, then the Hebrew Nobel laureate in the making, had difficulty with, especially after the Holocaust. As is well known, the inconceivable decimation of the Jewish people by this horrific catastrophe shook up the piety of many traditionally observant Jews. As mentioned previously, however, Agnon continued to live as a pious Jew and did not show outward signs of such a shakeup. Yet his post-Holocaust literary treatment of Jewish martyrdom clearly attests to his inner struggle with this difficult issue. This struggle compelled him to rein in his earlier (pre-Holocaust) fictional critique of the economy of "sacred" or "martyric" pain. This conflict may also explain his inability to complete his (post-Holocaust) novel *Shirah*,[23] in which the relations between pain and knowledge (both scholarly and carnal) play a major part.

In what follows I offer an analysis of the early stages of this process in the 1939 novel *Ore'ah nata lalun* (A Guest for the Night) and the 1947 story "Lefi ha-tza`ar ha-sakhar" (Measuring Gain by Pain). I argue that in these works Agnon emerges as a pioneer of the later double turn in Israeli literature

and art toward the *embodiment* of martyric pain and its analysis as "unreasonable." Moreover, I wish to suggest that context of his endeavor is quite atypical: Agnon's concern is not the new, militaristic, Zionist 'Akedah; rather, it is the Jewish "Sanctification of the Name" of old, acts of kiddush ha-shem in which the 'Akedah functioned as the perennial Jewish emblem of passive martyrdom in the face of persecutions.[24]

Agnon's 1939 masterpiece *A Guest for the Night* was apparently inspired by his visit to his war-ravaged Galician hometown in 1930.[25] Though no time marker is openly mentioned in the text, the "Great War" (World War I) is very palpable in the novel from its beginning. The narrator, who is the "Guest" from the Land of Israel arrives, symbolically enough, on the eve of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The first local inhabitant whom he meets is a train dispatcher. During the war this dispatcher lost not only his arm but also his name and had since become known as "Rubberowitz," after his rubber prosthetic.

Nor are the dispatcher's losses unique: every day the Guest encounters residents who were similarly maimed, missing a nose or a leg, not to mention families that were practically decimated, having lost their loved ones in the war and its no less violent aftermath. Amidst this setting of decline and destruction, Agnon has his nameless protagonist, who happens to be a professional author, engage in a nostalgic project of restoration. However, the townspeople have given up on their town's future and hope to leave it for greener pastures, despite the Guest's tireless efforts—through numerous conversations—to convince them otherwise. He also invests his energies in reopening the Old House of Study, the one he nostalgically remembers from childhood as a vibrant center of Jewish learning and the "heart" of the town's life. This project succeeds for a while but is short-lived. The attempt to restore the town to its past glory fails, and the Guest returns to his home in the Land of Israel (as do several other inhabitants).

The Guest's failure to revive life in the Jewish diaspora is famously symbolized by a complicated and parodic plot involving the key to the Old House of Study. In keeping with Agnon's consummate irony, he endows the key with two levels of meanings: while realistically the key stands for the old House of Study, seen here as the "heart" of the Jewish community, it also stands for the Guest's ego, which is ironically subjected here to Freudian interpretation. Moreover, the Guest loses the original key early in the plot, using a substitute key through most of his visit, and finds the original

key only on his return to Jerusalem: one can only imagine the wide array of interpretations elicited by this novel.

In addition, given the timing of its publication, the novel was perceived as a profoundly prophetic depiction of the Holocaust; it is often even mistakenly thought of as a Holocaust novel. From today's vantage point, however, a different foreshadowing emerges. Although mentioned only once, the 'Akedah is critiqued here as an *enacted* sacrifice, thus anticipating by several decades the revolt against it by the so-called Isaac generation of Israeli writers and artists during the 1970s (and even earlier).[26]

Yet, it is not the novel's first-person narrator, the Guest of the novel's title, who is entrusted with this heretical approach; rather, Agnon frames this assessment within a disagreement between two of the Guest's closest friends, the pious cantor Reb Shlomo Bach and his defiant son Daniel Bach, who has lost his faith in the trenches of World War I. The son is grudgingly willing to accept his father's sanctioning of self-sacrifice on the altar of *historical* traditional Jewish martyrdom—the aforementioned kiddush ha-shem symbolized by the enacted 'Akedah—but he adamantly rejects the mass victimization of his contemporaries during the recent war and its aftermath.[27] Faced by the afflictions of the present, Daniel Bach offers a totally personal, embodied interpretation, arguing that the sheer burgeoning of suffering and pain is beyond the limits of human frailty and hence defies any reasonable justification: ""One can bind himself on the altar and give up his life for the Sanctification of the Name until his soul departs while he recites the prayer of the Unification of the Name. However, to be bound every day, at any time, and at any hour on *seven altars*, and to have one limb burned today and a second on another day—this is *beyond the power of human suffering*. I am of a woman born, *flesh and blood*; when my flesh decays and my blood reeks, my lips cannot sing the praise of the Holy One Blessed Be He."[28]

The arithmetic (seven altars, one limb) of Agnon's young objector is reminiscent of the challenge to Abraham's near-sacrifice of his "only son" posed by the mother of the seven martyred sons of Hanukah fame in Jewish tradition. This "mother of seven" appears multiple times throughout the Jewish corpus, not to mention in diverse incarnations in Christianity and Islam. She first appears, described only as "the mother," in 2 and 4 Maccabees (from the late Hellenistic/Roman period). Later sources mentioning her story include the Babylonian Talmud (Gittin 57b), midrash (Lamentations Rabbah), and the anonymous tenth-century Hebrew "history" of the Second Temple,

Sefer Yosippon. Although unnamed in Maccabees, she is known in Jewish tradition mostly as Hannah, a name given in one of the later versions of *Sefer Yosippon*.[29] Despite some significant narrative differences, in all versions the mother is a model of courage and fortitude, stoically encouraging her sons to be killed one by one, rather than violate Jewish law and bow down to the foreign ruler, the ruthless "Greek" king Antiochus the IV. Only in one midrashic version of this tale, however, does the mother, named Miriam bat-Tanhum rather than the popular Hannah, forcefully challenge the biblical Abraham, saying to her seventh (infant) son, "My son, go to Abraham our forefather and tell him: 'Thus said my mother: Be not proud of yourself! You bound [your son] on *one* altar only, whereas I bound [my sons] on *seven* altars. Yours (was) a trial; but mine (is) an actual deed!'"[30]

In *A Guest for the Night*, Agnon apparently alludes to this story through the formulaic number "seven" but reverses its rationalization. Whereas the "one versus seven" calculation serves the midrashic mother in claiming her place of honor within the sanctified tradition of martyric self-denial, Agnon's Jewish representative of the European generation of 1914 refuses to carry on that very tradition, the one that perceives martyric suffering as beautiful, ennobling, and the source of higher knowledge. Instead, he strips the hallowed institution of its sanctity and exposes the glorious self-sacrificers/martyrs as abject victims. This distinction can only be inferred, however, because in Hebrew the same word, *korbanot*, is used for both "sacrifices" and "victims," thus effacing the semantic difference.[31] Moreover, through this protesting character Agnon exposes the unreasonable economy of the endeavor, insisting that a spirit/body dialectics undermines the efficacy of any continually agonizing test because it is beyond people's all-too-human corporeal weakness.

Powerful as it is, Daniel Bach's position is not supported by the novel as a whole. The ultimate thrust of the narrative is precisely the Guest's attempt to resurrect the lost tradition of piety that upholds Jewish martyrdom and rationalizes self-sacrifice and suffering at any cost. Yet given Agnon's deft irony, this endeavor is not the novel's last word. Eventually, the key of the Old House of Study, the subject of an entangled parodic plot that intrigued critics soon after publication, turns out to be not a *mafte'aḥ*—literally, an "opener," as indicated by the Hebrew semantics of the word—but rather a *shlissl*, literally a "locker," as in the semantics of the Yiddish (and German) word for "key." Though Agnon uses only the Hebrew word throughout, he deftly plays with the bilingual semantics of the referent by using the lexical

combination of *mafte'aḥ u-man'ul* ("key and *lock*") and by emphasizing the failure of the substitute key—as well as its user—to open the door. He no doubt expected his Hebrew readers not only to recall that his characters were probably speaking Yiddish but also to be fully aware of the symbolic valence that each of the languages held at the time and place of the novel's publication, with Hebrew standing for the Zionist revival in the Land of Israel and Yiddish standing for the closure or endpoint of the diaspora.[32] Accordingly, by the end of the novel, the narrating Guest, who, like the protesting son Daniel, is flesh and blood and hence human and frail,[33] is forever locked out of the world of his fathers: the world of Torah study, piety, and devout martyrdom.[34]

Given that *A Guest for the Night* was written before 1939, we may ask what happened to Agnon's critical impulse toward the martyric tradition *after* the war. This question is just one aspect of a larger issue that occupied Agnon's critics early on. It was posed in different guises in Sidra Ezrahi's "Agnon Before and After," and more transparently (and in extensive detail) in Dan Laor's "Did Agnon Write About the Shoah?"[35] From my perspective, it seems that even if Agnon did not write directly about the Holocaust (an assumption that in any case has been challenged by recent scholars[36]), the reorientation of his post–World War II work must be understood as a slowly evolving response to its long shadow. Thus, both Ezrahi and Alan Mintz argue that already in the short story "*Ha-siman*" (The Sign),[37] written during the war, Agnon exchanged the mantle of the modern ironist for that of the traditional elegist, invoking for this purpose Ibn Gabirol's *piyutim* and the medieval liturgical tradition writ large. This valuation, however, has been critiqued adamantly: some critics suggest that "The Sign" is nothing less than Agnon's "ironic gaze at God's mercy" and at the Shoah experience in general.[38]

This later observation may be also applicable to the story Agnon published shortly after the war, "*Lefi ha-tza'ar ha-sakhar*" (Measuring Gain by Pain). This complex and ironic tale was published in the 1947 High Holidays issue of *Ha'aretz*[39] and was later included as the first story in Agnon's post-Holocaust volume *Ha-esh ve-ha-'etzim* (*The Fire and the Wood*, 1962),[40] the last book he published in his lifetime (more volumes would appear posthumously). The book's title visibly places its subject matter within the orbit of the classical figure of Jewish martyrdom, the 'Akedah. Yet curiously, Agnon chose to introduce this material through a story that fully exposed what he no doubt found hard to acknowledge: the hunch that the exchange "economy" ostensibly at the heart of the martyric tradition may be in fact *barely reasonable*.

In the following I suggest that although "Measuring Gain by Pain" was interpreted early on as Agnon's "theological" response to the Holocaust,[41] insufficient attention has been given to its uneasy representation of the "economic" rationale of martyric pain and suffering or to its link with the analogous economy set up in the novel *A Guest for the Night*. Moreover, to date no attention has been given to the intimate relation between this theme and the ostensibly contrasting economy of secular-scholarly pain and knowledge coursing through the veins of Agnon's unfinished novel *Shirah*,[42] nor to the related, highly enigmatic 1954 story "'Ad 'olam" (Forevermore)[43] that closes Agnon's "Holocaust volume," *The Fire and the Wood*. In what follows, I attempt to close this gap.

"Measuring Gain by Pain" is set in an undefined Jewish place and time. Its protagonist is Mar Tzidkiya ("Mr. Righteous" and perhaps also "Mr. Theodicy"[44]) a greatly learned teacher, liturgist, and cantor—a devout man who at a young age had been appointed to lead his small community that is currently under duress. (The backdrop is often read by critics as the Crusades,[45] though nothing in the text indicates this, except for the general premodern atmosphere created, among other things, by the centrality of liturgy in the story.) It is not the community's hard times, however, that is the focus of the narrative but rather Mar Tzidkiya's artistic endeavors, which are his major preoccupation. Even though he is very distressed by the dangers threatening his fellow parishioners, he channels his energies into the composition of liturgy, perhaps as a potential defense against adversaries; fittingly, his compositions focus on the theme of martyrdom.

A close reading of the story discloses, however, that the martyric economy debated in *A Guest for the Night*—namely, Daniel Bach's daring dismissal of theodicy in the name of the wounded and pained body—did in fact survive Agnon's personal war of loyalties, although in an altered fashion. Faithful to its title, the story is explicitly controlled by an uncanny double economy of pain and gain, which differs greatly from the exchange economy of sacrifice implied in the prewar novel. Whereas in *A Guest for the Night* the spirit/body (or sacrifice/ victim) dialectic is questioned by a rebellious army veteran, after World War II and the Holocaust a similar dialectic is daringly planted at the heart of a traditional, pious setting. Here, the glorified textuality of an "'Akedah"—a medieval-style liturgy about the martyrdom of Isaac—composed in praise of the "Holy One Blessed be He," is undercut by the blasphemy of a toothless and deformed beggar, the victim of baffling existential suffering and visceral pain.[46]

Most important, whereas Daniel Bach's change of heart was provoked by his own *personal* corporeal experience of the agony of war, the righteous Mar Tzidkiya—ostensibly a selfless spiritual leader and an author of supremely evocative liturgy[47]—leads a life of relative comfort and safety. His notion of pain and suffering derives from his awareness of "the pain of others," to paraphrase Susan Sontag.[48] Being a man of character, however, he expects to have to pay for being so fortunate, trading not pain for knowledge but rather giving to the poor as a payment for his life of wholeness. Reflecting Agnon's cool sense of irony, Mar Tzidkiya's hidden cache of money for the poor grows in tandem with his increasing valuation of the worth of his own compositions. The reasonableness of this economy, articulated in a free indirect style to indicate the presumed agreement between narrator and hero, acknowledges that whether or not one experiences misfortune is totally arbitrary: "If you dwell in a house whereas the poor goes begging from door to door, if you do not lack for food while another must beg for bread, if you sleep on soft cushions when the poor must sleep on the dirt, it is not because you are better; it is only because Esau's hands are still occupied with your brother and are not free to turn to you; one is therefore better off opening his hand to his brother rather than Esau breaking into his home."[49]

Moreover, considering his poems in praise of the Almighty to be the crown of his own piety, Mar Tzidkiya measures their worth—the recognition or reward of his artistic creativity—by the quality of the poor person knocking on his door: the more learned and well-behaved the beggar, the better deserving the poem, and vice versa. An undeserving beggar would sentence his poem to the rubbish pit: "Thanks to his righteous giving to the poor for every poem he composed . . . he was shown by the beggars, as if by a finger,[50] which of his poems is worthwhile, and which is not."[51]

Yet this exchange economy—"measuring gain by pain"—suddenly comes to a screeching halt. After full immersion in and contemplation of the ubiquitous travails of the people of Israel and their loving acceptance of their daily 'Akedot (martyric acts of kiddush ha-shem), of their being everywhere bound and slaughtered, Mar Tzidkiya invokes the postbiblical image of "Isaac's ashes on the altar"—obviously indicating an enacted sacrifice, rather than a binding, as Shalom Spiegel would famously argue a few years later.[52] He then produces the pinnacle of his creativity: what he judges to be the most exalted and eloquent 'Akedah poem ever written. This liturgical poem, our protagonist reasons, based on an allusion to an enacted sacrifice rather than a last-minute deliverance, would be a perfect addition to the Yom Kippur

minḥah (afternoon) service. Faithful to his deal with God, Mar Tzidikiya takes out the only golden coin in his possession, which he had stashed away for Yom Kippur expenses, and adds it to the treasure waiting for the daily beggar. But who shows up at the door that day if not the most decrepit and sacrilegious beggar, one who refuses both the liturgist's words of consolation and his golden coin, offensively stating, "I have no strength for this man: my torments [*yisuray*] shriek out of my flesh and he says, God will help."[53]

So, what is a *tzaddik,* a righteous and generous man, to do? Burn the pinnacle of his work? No, Mar Tzidkiya the tzaddik rationalizes, it is surely the beggar's extreme pain and torment that confounded his reasoning ("*shibshu et da'ato*")[54] and, with it, the foolproof system of pain and gain. Yet this quite reasonable "economic" inference lasts only a moment, for the duration of a very brief sentence. Being as righteous as he is, Mar Tzidkiya soon finds fault with himself—or rather several kinds of faults, not least among them his neglect of his family for the sake of his creative ventures and the transformation of Isaac's wholly burnt sacrifice of himself to God ("'*olato shel makom*") into "*ke-min shir*" (a kind of poem). Resigned to his punishment, the pious liturgist burns his glorious 'Akedah poem to ashes and goes on to live a life of learning and good deeds without the reward of creative accomplishment. The economy intimated in the story's title has come then to a screeching halt. Even a pious and righteous *paytan* (liturgist) cannot count on the reasonably calculated system of reward and punishment promised to the devout.

Had this story been written earlier, I suspect Agnon might have stopped here. In 1947, however, he could not do so. Facing the horrific burden of millions of Holocaust martyrs, he must have felt compelled to restore redemptive power to the martyric tradition, as indeed he did in the second half of this story (though not without ironic reversals even here) and as he would continue to do throughout most of his later work. Thus, after years of an artistically barren life of devout service to God and the community, when he is nearly on his deathbed, Heaven finally responds to the righteous paytan's unstated question, "Why was my beautiful 'Akedah liturgy rejected?" Yet the response is just as enigmatic as his "test." It consists only of the title of our story but is rendered in Aramaic rather than in Hebrew: "*lefum tza'ara agra*" (measuring gain by pain).

So, what does this reply mean? Without any hesitation, our protagonist interprets the reply from Heaven in a manner that would not put any Apollonian Pythia to shame: "He immediately [lit. mainly, *be-iḥud*] understood

that the 'Akedah he had composed was wanted and welcome, and [therefore] he was sent a sickly beggar who suffered mightily in this world. But since his heart did not wholly accept that beggar, he was answered in Aramaic, because only if one's heart is whole does the Holy One Blessed Be He entertain him in the holy tongue, but if his heart is not whole, he will be answered in Aramaic."[55]

Thus, without any embarrassment, Mar Tzidkiya reverses his foolproof economy of old, now accepting the sickly and filthy beggar as the sign of the *high* quality of his composition. He therefore interprets the Aramaic reply as a punishment for his earlier failure to understand the logic of this economy and assumes that with this he has wiped his balance sheet clean and hence he is ready to finally commit his beautiful 'Akedah poem to paper. But to no avail: "he failed to commit even one letter to paper." Grief stricken, he wonders what is happening, but no answer is forthcoming. Instead, the narrator addresses the reader directly: "But you [m.] should not be surprised. Since his 'Akedah was accepted on high there was no need of it down here." This may be good news indeed, but one may wonder why it is not shared with our poor protagonist. Why has Agnon decided to leave him chagrined, hurt by the divine judgment passed on his greatest life creation? Moreover, why has Agnon left us, his readers, no clue about the great ironic game of reversal that is played out here not only at the expense of the protagonist but also of most of his readers?

For what is left unexplored in the story is the fact that its Hebrew title—encompassing the moral and "economic" principle that has dictated the behavior under duress of our righteous protagonist—is itself derivative in that it is only a translation of the Aramaic. Indeed, it is precisely the Aramaic phrase, *lefum tza'ara 'agra*, the one that the protagonist of the story had dismissed as secondary and hence punitive, that is the *original*, coming directly from the Mishnah. Moreover, this phrase is quite well known among traditionally educated Jews because it is apparently the briefest saying in the mishnaic corpus, consisting only of the enigmatic statement: "Ben Hah Hah used to say: *lefum tza'ara 'agra*" (Avot 5:23).

Was Agnon playing here again on Jewish bilingualism, replacing Yiddish with Aramaic? Perhaps. Indeed, he could have assumed that some of his Hebrew readers at the time of publication would see through his "joke," but certainly not most of them; those raised in the new secular system of education run by the Labor movement in pre-state Palestine would be unfamiliar with the Mishnah and unversed in Aramaic. Yet once we are aware

of this source, how can we take seriously the story's presumption that a highly learned and righteous Jewish man, at any time and place, would *not* recognize this mishnaic phrase, famous for its oddity and lack of context?

Indeed, we cannot. But perhaps this is precisely the point. Perhaps this is Agnon's way of not only doubling his protagonist's burden of failure but also of poking fun at his readers. In fact, the "mistaken assumption" of the pious Mar Tzidkiya only mirrors the sentiment of the majority of Agnon's secular readers, who would have naturally assumed that Hebrew is necessarily the original language of grace, as opposed to all other "secondary" Jewish languages (from ancient Aramaic to medieval Yiddish and similar Jewish diasporic vernaculars).[56]

Yet I believe that this typically Agnonian jest camouflages a deeply serious matter. Perhaps the protagonist's "logical lapse" is only meant to attract our attention, asking us to put ourselves in the place of "Mr. Righteous" (or even of his inventor), and imagine him (or them) struggling, not always successfully, to satisfy both their obligation to their beloved community under duress and their artistic or creative egos. Intriguingly, similar conflicts and ambiguities characterize much of Agnon's later work. And just as intriguingly, most of this late-life work was relegated to the drawer and published only posthumously.[57] This congruence between art and life may raise the following questions: Does the quasi-redemptive closure—of both the story and the author's life work—mute the forcefulness of the agonistic voice of the beggar, of the story's harsh denial of any redemptive value of physical torments, and, by extension, of the very "righteous yet creative" economy established by the devout liturgical poet in his earlier life? Moreover, given the time of publication, was Agnon admitting here to his own wrestling with the (in)adequacy of a long liturgical tradition that exalted martyric suffering and pain? Was this his version of Adorno's famously (mis)quoted aphorism, "It is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz"?[58] Or was he maybe unknowingly writing a Hebrew version of *The Plague*, Camus's parable about World War II /the Holocaust (published, perhaps not totally by chance, in the very same year as this story)?[59]

The import of *The Plague*, suggests Shoshana Felman, is that the only response matching a catastrophe like the Holocaust is personal involvement in it, witnessing the horror firsthand, in the living flesh, as did Camus's reporter, Raymond Rambert, when he decided to stay and help fight the plague rather than escape it:

> The specific task of the literary testimony is . . . to open up in that belated witness, which the reader now historically becomes, the imaginative capability of perceiving history—what is happening to others—in one's own body, with the power of sight (of insight) usually afforded only by one's own immediate physical involvement. . . . Rambert has to learn on his body what a holocaust—a situation of total condemnation—is: a situation which does not—cannot—except the witness, an experience that requires one to live through one's own death.[60]

In some sense, Agnon had anticipated Camus's Rambert in *A Guest for the Night* by having Daniel Bach witness the horror "in the flesh" in the trenches of World War I. In the later story "Measuring Gain by Pain," however, it is the beggar who is plagued by the most horrendous boils (*sheḥin*), open bloody wounds that soil his clothing. But it seems that Mar Tzidkiya, unlike Camus's Rambert, fails his test—his encounter with the most emblematic of human bodily suffering—by shunning it and judging its bearer, instead of feeling empathy and volunteering to help.[61]

More intriguingly, can we see our way from the anonymous beggar's skin disease to the leprosy plaguing Agnon's 1930s novel *Shirah* and the story "Ad 'olam" (Forevermore)? In those two "secular" works, the disease stands for the ultimate redemptive pain, perhaps a kind of secular martyrdom, traded for both erotic consummation and scholarly (rather than divine) knowledge qua power. This is not the place for a full answer to this question. Yet, although much ink has been spilled over these two interconnected works (which were apparently intended as parts of a larger narrative),[62] no attention has been paid to the allusions they contain to the short story "Measuring Gain by Pain." It seems however that, in some sense, *Shirah* and "Forevermore" may be considered contemporary "secular" mirror images of this ostensibly medieval "religious" story. *Shirah* in particular is peppered with straightforward critiques of the devotional life of characters who are contemporary iterations of Mar Tzidkiya.[63] The skin disease that serves as the physical mark of the beggar who triggers the medieval scholar's fall from divine grace is "upgraded," so to speak, to leprosy in both *Shirah* and "Forevermore." This ancient and asocial disease functions as a kind of secular martyrdom, allowing the protagonists—pace Geoffrey Harpham—to trade physical pain and suffering for scholarly or carnal knowledge or both.

The interconnectedness among these very different literary works should come as no surprise once we consider the timing of their creation. The two short stories and early chapters of the unfinished novel were mostly published between 1947 and 1956, the years during which the magnitude of the trauma and catastrophe of the Holocaust was only beginning to be processed. Together, these works attest to Agnon's struggle in the face of this catastrophe to hold on not only to the faith of his fathers but also to the secular alternatives for their world—whether scientific knowledge or erotic love. He seems to be asking whether self-sacrifice—for anything, sacred or profane—is worth its price.

Moreover, if in the pre-Holocaust novel *A Guest for the Night* Agnon could still objectify the question and split the answer through a simplistic pious/secularist dichotomy (represented by Rabbi Bach the elder and his rebellious young son), his post-Holocaust work complicates the issue by bringing the question closer to home—to the creative impulse. It is not by chance that the major characters of the post-Holocaust works mentioned here are all driven by some sort of artistic or scholarly talent and ambition. Through them Agnon seems to be asking a crucial post-Holocaust question of personal import: Should he himself go about his creative business as usual, just as his fictional protagonists—from the devout Mar Tzidkiya to the secular historians Manfred Herbst (*Shirah*) and 'Adiel 'Amzeh ("Forevermore")—try to do? Agnon's practical answer is well known: he continued writing but stopped publishing. Moreover, he also changed his mode of writing. The great fabulist, the inventor of imaginative fictions past and present, turned into a documentarian of sorts, a writer of testimonies, erecting a written monument to his townspeople. He was "rebuilding a city"—his devastated hometown Buchach—and its people, not with blocks and mortar but in language and images, as he himself put it so well.[64]

Intriguingly, the focus of many of these stories is precisely the martyrdom/ kiddush ha-shem/ 'Akedaic death during the Holocaust of Buchach's Jewish residents. So why did Agnon refuse to have them published in his lifetime? Was he apprehensive about the apotheosis of martyrdom underlining some of these narratives? Conversely, was he embarrassed by his characteristically innate ironic impulse that made its way, perhaps against his better judgment, into the actions of others?

Although these intriguing questions—among others—await further research, it seems fair to conclude for now that Agnon's Holocaust fiction bears the marks of a profound crisis that expressed itself, *inter alia*, in an

ironic attitude toward the hallowed martyric economy of old. In allowing his characters either to experience or openly express doubt about the reasonableness of this tradition, his corpus stands in stark contrast to the post-Holocaust writings of Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox thinkers, such as Rabbi Simha Elberg or Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, who continued the traditional sanctification of the 'Akedah as an emblem of sanctified martyrdom.[65] In so doing, Agnon may have paved the way—perhaps against his better judgment and intention—for the critique and revision of the "new secularist national martyrdom that was labeled "*Osher 'Akedah*" (the joy or happiness or glory of martyrdom) as early as 1919 and that gained further momentum in the liberation discourse of Israel's War of Independence.[66]

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 230.

2. Naomi Seidman, *Sarah Schenirer and the Bais Yaakov Movement: A Revolution in the Name of Tradition* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2019), 6.

3. Seidman, *Sarah Schenirer,* 222–23.

4. Heschel, *Abraham Geiger*, 22.

5. David Myers, *The Stakes of History: On the Use and Abuse of Jewish History for Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 118.

6. See, for example, Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 148–49.

7. Robert Cover, "Nomos and Narrative," in *Narrative, Violence, and the Law: The Essays of Robert Cover*, ed. Martha Minow, Michael Ryan, and Austin Sarat (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 101, and its citation of George Steiner's *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

8. See also Wendy Brown, "Wounded Attachments," in *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 52–76, esp. 75; Lauren Berlant, "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics," in *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*, ed. Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 126–60, esp. 144–48.

CHAPTER 1

Note to epigraph: Adam Kirsch, "Israel's Founding Novelist," *New Yorker*, November 21, 2016, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/israels-founding-novelist.

1. Yael S. Feldman, *Glory and Agony: Isaac's Sacrifice and National Narrative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

2. Yael S. Feldman, "Deliverance Denied: Isaac's Sacrifice in Israeli Arts and Culture—A Jewish-Christian Exchange?" in *The Bible Retold by Jewish Artists, Writers, Composers and Filmmakers*, ed. Helen Leneman and Barry Dov Walfish (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2015), 85–117. Cf. Shulamit Laderman, "Models of Interaction Between Judaism and Christianity as Seen Through Artistic Representations of the Sacrifice of Isaac," in *The Actuality of Sacrifice: Past*

and Present, ed. Alberdina Houtman, Marcel Poorthuis, Joshua Schwartz, and Yossi Turner (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 343–76.

3. For details about the momentous personal events that led to Agnon's return to Jewish religion see Dan Laor, *Hayey Agnon* (Agnon's Life) (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1998), 160–67.

4. The understanding of self-annihilation in suicide/martyrdom as an economically "reasonable" barter between man and god/s was one of the cornerstones of the nascent field of sociology developed near the beginning of the twentieth century by its French founder Émile Durkheim and his disciples Henry Hubert and Marcel Mauss. This approach continued to thrive in the work of their heirs Battaille, Derrida, and others. See Émile Durkheim, *Suicide* [1897], trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (London: Routledge, 1952); Henry Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function* [1899], trans. W. D. Halls (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* [1925], trans. Ian Cunnison (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1954); Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volumes II and III* [1947, 1986], trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991); René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* [1972], trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* [1992], trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); and Ivan Strenski, *Contesting Sacrifice: Religion, Nationalism, and Social Thought in France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

5. Euripides had applied a similar though less striking rewriting to the sacrificed Trojan princess Polyxena in his earlier play *Hecuba* (424 B.C.E.).

6. Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis,* trans. Nicholas Rudall (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 59. For a summary of the scholarly debate about the interpretation of this sudden turning point in the play, and especially for feminist critiques of the narrow choice—to become a victim willingly—that Iphigenia is actually allowed, see Feldman, *Glory and Agony*, 27–30.

7. See, for example. Robert Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade* (Berkeley: University Press of California, 1987); Arthur J. Droge and James Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992); Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God*: *Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Elisabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); and Shmuel Shepkaru, *Jewish Martyrs in the Pagan and Christian Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

8. See Feldman, "Deliverance Denied."

9. Based on Genesis 31, this patriarchal "deity" was interpreted in Jewish mysticism as the representation of evil and heresy (equivalent to *sitra aḥra*, the "other" or "dark" side).

10. For details see Feldman, *Glory and Agony*, 1–10. For an analysis of an early, pre-Israel [1942!] case of rejection of the classical 'Akedah "economy," see Yael Feldman, "Is Ashman the Forgotten Grandfather of the Psycho-Political Akedah of Contemporary Israel?" in *Habimah: 'Iyunim ḥadashim be-te'atron le'umi* (*New Studies of Habimah, a National Theater*), ed. Shelly Zer-Zion, Dorit Yerushalmi, and Gad Kaynar-Kissinger (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2017), 405–16.

11. Feldman, *Glory and Agony*, 11–38.

12. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Trading Pain for Knowledge or: How the West was Won," *Social Research* 75, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 485–510.

13. Harpham cites Simone Weil's famous statement, "The only way into truth is through one's own annihilation," found in her essay, "Human Personality" (originally, *La personne et*

le sacré [!], 1933). Cf. Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self in Early Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

14. Interestingly, Harpham was then the president and director of the National Humanities Center in North Carolina.

15. On "sacred" or "holy" pain and their secular offshoots, see Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Cf. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); David B. Morris, *The Culture of Pain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and Talal Asad, "Thinking About Agency and Pain," in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 67–124.

16. Harpham, "Trading Pain," 485–86. Cf. Esther Cohen, Leona Toker, Manuela Consonni, and Otniel E. Dror, eds., *Knowledge and Pain* (Leiden, Belgium: Brill, 2012). My thanks to the editors of that volume for the invitation to present an early foray into this theme at the Scholion Seminar on Knowledge and Pain at the Hebrew University in May 2010.

17. Feldman, *Glory and Agony*, 75–84. This critique reached new heights following the infamous Kishinev pogrom; see Yael S. Feldman, "'Not as Sheep Led to Slaughter'? On Trauma, Selective Memory, and the Making of Historical Consciousness," *Jewish Social Studies* 19, no. 3 (2013): 139–69.

18. Feldman, *Glory and Agony*, 70–106.

19. Notice that the traditional label of the story of Genesis 22 is *'Akedah,* namely, "binding," rather than *Korban* (sacrifice; victim);for more on this issue see Feldman, *Glory and Agony,* 41–69.

20. By the date 1880s I refer to the Russian pogroms that led to the formation of the first Jewish self-defense movements along with the earliest modern Jewish national martyric discourse; as I show in *Glory and Agony*, this discourse began to wane as early as the 1960s but came virtually under attack in Israeli culture after the 1973 War, and even more so after the Lebanon War of 1982.

21. Feldman, *Glory and Agony*, 131–310.

22. Feldman, "'Not as Sheep.'"

23. Although the first chapter of *Shirah* was published in the fall of 1948, and other chapters followed in the next two decades, the novel was published only posthumously in 1971.

24. For a different take on the pro and con argument over Jewish martyrdom in Agnon's work, see Michal Arbel, "Continuity and Crisis in National Identity in Agnon's *A Guest for the Night*, 'The Letter,' and 'The Sign,'" in *Itot shel shinui: Sifruyot yehudiot ba-tekufah ha-modernit*, ed. Gidi Nevo, Michal Arbel, and Michael Gluzman (Sede Boker: Ben Gurion Institute, 2008), 173–208.

For a general analysis of the role of economy in Agnon's corpus, see Yonatan Sagiv, *Indebted: Capitalism and Religion in the Writings of Shmuel Yosef Agnon* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2016).

25. S. Y. Agnon, *Ore'aḥ nata lalun* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1975 [1939]); *A Guest for the Night*, ed. Naftali C. Brandwein and Allen Mandelbaum, trans. Misha Louvish (New York: Schocken, 1968); republished with a new foreword by Jeffrey Saks (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2015).

26. The highlights of this literary revolt, which criticized the national sacrifice of contemporary Isaacs rather than lauding it, include early works by some of the most prestigious veteran Israeli authors, such as Amos Oz, Shulamit Hareven, and A. B. Yehoshua. See Feldman,

Glory and Agony, 215–309; for Amos Oz's early 1960s antecedents, see Feldman, *Glory and Agony*, 183–214.

27. Interestingly, Agnon does not engage here in an oedipal analysis of the son–father agon; theirs is an ideational parting of the ways, portrayed with hardly any deep psychological dynamics.

28. Agnon, *Ore'aḥ*, 37; emphasis added. All translations from the Hebrew are mine.

29. See David Flusser, ed., *Sefer Yosippon* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1978), Vol. 1:70–75. For English, see *Sepher Yosippon: A Tenth-Century History of Ancient Israel*, translated and introduced by Steven Bowman (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State UP, 2022), 67–71.

30. Lamentation Rabbah 1, 50; emphasis added. Of the rich scholarly literature on "the mother of the seven sons," Aharon Agus emphasizes the narrator's need to *rationalize* the story, so that it sounds both heroic and true; see *The Binding of Isaac and Messiah* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 14ff. That this story was the earliest model for the Jewish martyrdom tradition (*harugei malkhut*) was established by Gerson D. Cohen, "Hannah and Her Seven Sons in Hebrew Literature," in *Sefer ha-yovel* [*Festschrift*] *for M. M. Kaplan* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1953), 109–23; cf. Jan Willem van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviors of the Jewish People* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 210–69; on the rabbinic versions of the tale see Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Riqmat Hayim* (*Web of Life*): *Folklore in Rabbinic Literature* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996), 108–28; for the medieval versions see Elisheva Baumgarten and Rela Koshalevsky, "From the 'Mother and Her Sons' to the 'Mother of Sons' in Medieval Ashkenaz," *Zion* 71, no. 3 (2006): 301–42; and Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, "The Mother and Seven Sons in Late Antique and Medieval Ashkenazi Judaism: Narrative Transformations and Communal Identity," in *Dying for the Faith, Killing for the Faith* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 125–46.

31. On the various implications of the lack of lexical distinction in Hebrew between the notions of "sacrifice" and "victim" (and the Russian and German parallels), see Feldman, *Glory and Agony*, 34–36.

32. For my early exploration of this theme see Yael S. Feldman, "How Does a Convention Mean? A Semiotic Reading of Agnon's Bilingual Key-Irony in *A Guest for the Night*," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 56 (1985): 251–69. For a brief Hebrew version. see "*Bein mafte'aḥ le-man'ul: 'al ironia agnonit aḥat*" (Between a Key and a Lock: On Agnon's Irony), *Ha-sifrut* 32 (1983): 148–54. The implication of Agnon's bilingual irony was further developed recently in Jeffery Saks's foreword to the new English edition of *A Guest for the Night,* titled "Agnon's Roman à Clef of Going Home Again" (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2015), vii–xviii.

33. Agnon, *Ore'aḥ,* 440.

34. My reading here builds on my earlier interpretations in my articles "How Does a Convention Mean?" (n. 32) and "The Latent and the Manifest: Freudianism in *A Guest for the Night*," *Prooftexts* 7, no. 1 (January 1987), 29–39. In the 1980s my reading swerved from the mainstream redemptive interpretation of the novel's closure, as established by Baruch Kurzweil in his *Masot 'al sipurei Shai Agnon* (*Essays on S. Y. Agnon's Fiction*) (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1975), 57, and Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 308. Recent readings are still divided on the issue. Dan Laor upholds the novel's redemptive conclusion by highlighting Agnon's close relations with the Zionist rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935); see his *Shai Agnon: Hebetim Ḥadashim* (*Agnon: New Perspectives*) (Tel Aviv, 1995), 38. Others downplay the political solution and emphasize the art of writing as the only redemption left; for example, Anne Golomb Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return:*

S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing (Albany: State University of New York Press,1991), 100; Michal Arbel, "Rabbi Amnon of Maintz as an Exemplary Figure in Agnon's Work," in *Meḥkarim Ba-sipporet Ha-yehudit* (*Studies in Jewish Literature*), ed. Avidov Lipsker and Rella Kushlavsky (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2009), 2:325–59.

35. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, "Agnon Before and After," *Prooftexts* 2, no. 1 (January 1982): 78–94; Dan Laor, "Did Agnon Write About the Shoah?" *Yad Vashem Studies* 22 (1992): 17–63.

36. The edited volume—Hans-Jürgen Becker and Hillel Weiss, eds., *Agnon in Germany* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2010)—includes several refutations of this premise, including Hillel Weiss, "The Presence of the Holocaust in Agnon's Writings" (428–50) and Yaniv Hagbi, "Aspects of 'Primary Holocaust' in the Works of S. Y. Agnon" (451–72).

37. S. Y. Agnon, "*Ha-siman*," *Moznaim* 18, no. 2 (1944): 103–4. A greatly extended version was included in *Ha-esh ve-ha-ʿetzim* (*The Fire and the Wood*) (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1971), 283–315.

38. See Alan Mintz, "Between Holocaust and Homeland: 'The Sign' as a Dedicatory Story," '*Idan Ha-tzionut* (2000): 317–35. For a diametrically opposite take, see Nitza Ben-Dov, "An Ironic Gaze at God's Mercy—The Shoah Experience in Agnon's 'The Sign,'" in *Ḥayim Ketuvim: Israeli Literary Autobiographies* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 2011), 31–52.

39. S. Y. Agnon, "Lefi ha-tza'ar ha-sakhar," *Ha'aretz*, September 23, 1947.

40. S. Y. Agnon, "Lefi ha-tza'ar ha-sakhar," in *Ha-'esh ve-ha-ʿetzim*, 5–19.

41. This interpretation was established by Baruch Kurzweil early on; see his "The Fire and the Wood: An Interim Epic Summary After the 'Akedah," in *Masot 'al sipurei Shai Agnon* (*Essays on S.Y. Agnon's Fiction*) (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1975), 311–27. Hillel Weiss followed this interpretation in his "Remarks on 'Akedat Yitzhak," in *Ha-'akedah ve-ha-tokhehah* (*Binding and Reproach*), ed. Zvi Luz (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991), 50–51.

42. The first chapter of *Shirah* was published a year later, in 1948, also in *Ha'aretz*.

43. See S. Y. Agnon, "'*Ad 'olam*" [Forevermore] (1954), in *Ha-esh ve-ha-'etzim*, 315–34; and in Jeffrey Saks, ed., *Forevermore & Other Stories* (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2017).

44. My thanks to Hanoch Ben-Pazi of Bar Ilan University for the second suggestion. As we see, the story indeed struggles with the justification of divine judgment as possibly hinted by the name "Tzidkiya," which combines the Hebrew root for justice (tz.d.k) with the noun "Ya," one of the synonyms for the word "God."

45. For example, Aryeh Wineman reads the story as set in medieval times and also suggests that the hero's name may mean "Mr. Charity": the Hebrew word for almsgiving, *tzedakah,* also derives from the root tz.d.k. See his "Paytan and Paradox: An Analysis of Agnon's "Lefi ha-tsaʿar ha-sakhar,'" *Hebrew Union College Annual* 49 (1978), 295–310. Focusing on the rich midrashic tradition that nourished this tale, this article demonstrates the parallels between "Isaac's self-enacted sacrifice" as it appears in this corpus and the burning to ashes of Mar Tzidkiya's liturgy about it. Though this analogy is certainly evoked by Agnon's text, one should not ignore its weakness: How can a poem, an inanimate object with no will of its own that was sentenced to be burned by its creator, be compared to the Midrashic Isaac, who, unlike his passive biblical prototype, had been endowed with an independent will of his own, thus becoming the active martyr found in late antiquity and medieval Judaism? On the latter see especially Spiegel, n. 56.

46. Cf. the ambiguous, double message controlling Agnon's "*Petiḥah le-Kaddish*" (published in 1947 too!) as analyzed by James A. Diamond in "Agnon's Kaddish: Mourning for God," *Shofar* 22, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 22–42.

47. On the link between devotion to faith and dedication to art, see Michal Arbel's observation that in Agnon's stories, "issues of continuity and crisis of faith are always woven with questions of the artist and artistic destiny and devotion; the two contexts of devotion—to faith and to art—are almost inseparably interwoven." Arbel, "The Sad Cantoress Miriam-Devorah and Other Cantors in Agnon's Stories 'The Cantors' and 'Measuring Gain by Pain,'" *Ayin Gimel: A Journal for Agnon Studies* 2 (2012): 108–30.

48. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003) Susan Sontag "replied" to Virginia Woolf's question, "How are we to prevent war?" in her 1938 essay "Three Guineas" that grew out of her collection of images of the ravages inflicted by the Spanish Civil War, that horrific prelude to World War II. For a discussion of "Three Guineas," see Yael S. Feldman, "From Essentialism to Constructivism? The Gender of Peace and War in Gilman, Woolf, Freud," *Partial Answers: A Journal of Literature and History of Ideas* 2, no. 12 (January 2004): 113–45.

49. Agnon, *The Fire and the Wood,* 7.

50. Was "God" deliberately omitted here from the commonly used phrase "God's finger," which one would expect in this context?

51. Agnon, *The Fire and the Wood,* 7.

52. Shalom Spiegel, "*Me-aggadot Ha-'akedah*" (1950); translated as *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice*; trans. Judah Goldin (New York: Schocken, 1967). For a detailed analysis and contextualization, see Feldman, *Glory and Agony*, 154–57.

53. Agnon, *The Fire and the Wood,* 11.

54. The ironic reference to *Shibush* (meaning a disruption, mess-up, error)—Agnon's literary name for his Galician hometown Buchach—is transparent.

55. Agnon, *Fire and the Wood,* 18.

56. Of the rich literature about the fraught relationship between Yiddish and Hebrew, especially during the twentieth century, see Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

57. See the harsh, anti-redemptive story "*Kisui ha-dam*" (Covering the Blood) in contrast to "*Hadom ve-kise"* (Footrest and Royal Seat), both published posthumously in *Lifnim min ha-homah* (*Inside the City Walls*) (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1976).

58. Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 17–34.

59. Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

60. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 108.

61. This description of the beggar naturally lends itself to a messianic interpretation that would multiply the fault and "fall" of Mar Tzidkiya for his failure to recognize him. For the wide range of the symbolic valence of the image of the beggar, see Galili Shahar, "The Beggars," in *Gufim ve-shemot* (*Bodies and Names: Readings in Modern Jewish Literature*) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2016), 90–149.

62. In her note to the second Hebrew edition of *Shirah* (Schocken, 1974, p. 542), Agnon's daughter and literary executor Emunah Yaron writes, "My father wrote *Shirah* and the story 'Forevermore' at the same time. After the [first] publication of *Shirah* [1971], Rafi Weiser of Agnon's Archive found how 'Forevermore' fits in a specific page of the manuscript of *Shirah.* Apparently, at a certain point in time 'Forevermore' was pulled out of *Shirah* and became an

independent story. The 1974 edition of *Shirah* also includes a 'Final Chapter' in which the male protagonist of the novel, the historian and would-be dramaturg Dr. Manfred Herbst, decides to follow his beloved, the now sick Shirah, to the lepers' residence. In 'Forevermore' the scholar Adi'el Amzeh makes a similar decision not for the love of a woman but rather for the love of knowledge [!]: he enters a lepers' residence only to gain access to an old manuscript that held an indispensable clue for the historical study to which he has dedicated his whole life."

63. For example, *Shirah*, 243: "Should I admire the fact that some good for nothing ignored his wife and young children while they were dying of hunger so he could enjoy being idle—what some call 'worshipping god'?"

64. Agnon dedicated himself to "rebuilding" his hometown Buchach in his late stories, yet never had them published . His stories were posthumously published in the book *'Ir u-melo'ah* (1973) and only recently translated to English as Alan Mintz and Jeffrey Saks, eds., *A City in Its Fullness* (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2016).

65. For example, Rabbi Simha Eilberg, *Akeidath Treblinka* (Shanghai: n.p., 1946); Eliezer Berkovits, *With God in Hell: Judaism in the Ghettos and Death Camps* (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1979); and Elie Wiesel, *Night, Dawn, the Accident: Three Tales* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972). According to Eilberg, the 'Akeydah "moved with Israel from land to land until it ended up in the death camp"; see "The Akedah of Treblinka," in *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses During and After the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 192–98. See also Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, "Holy Fire," in *Wrestling with God*, 30–40; Gershon Greenberg, "Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Thought About the Holocaust Since World War II: The Radicalized Aspect," in *Wrestling with God*, 11–25; Gershon Greenberg, "Sacred Death for Orthodox Jewish Thought During the Holocaust," in *Interaction Between Judaism and Christianity in History, Religion, Art, and Literature*, ed. Marcel Poorthuis, Joshua Schwartz, and Joseph Turner (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 289–315. See also Feldman, "'Not as Sheep Led to Slaughter?'"

66. For details, see Feldman, *Glory and Agony*. Portions of this chapter were presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies in Washington, D.C. (December 2011), at a Bar-Ilan University International Conference on "Nazism, Holocaust, and Ethics" (May 2018), and at a colloquium on "Mechanisms for Change and Development in the History of the Jews and Judaism" sponsored by both NYU and Tel Aviv University (May 2019). My thanks to the organizers and participants of these meetings for their fruitful critiques and suggestions, as well as to the editors and readers of the present version.

CHAPTER 2

1. This group includes Dov Sadan, Baruch Kurzweil, Meshulam Tukhner, David Kena'ani and others.

2. See Avino'am Barshay, "Kavim ba-bikoret le-dyukan Agnon ha-sofer," in *S. Y. Agnon ba-bikoret ha-'ivrit: sikumim ve-ha'arakhot 'al yetzirato,* Vol. 1, ed. Avino'am Barshay (Tel Aviv: Schocken, Open University, 1991).

3. Dov Sadan, "Be-mevoey sefer ve-sofro: mavo," in *Pesher Agnon*, ed. Meshulam Tukhner (Tel Aviv: Masada, 1968), 7–26.

4. Gershon Shaked, *Omanut ha-sipur shel Agnon* (Merhavia: Sifriat Po'alim, 1973).