The Blemished Human: ShmuÊ¾el Yosef Agnonâ€™s â€œÊ¿Ovadyah baÊ¿al mumâ€• as a Wartime Story

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The Blemished Human

Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon's "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum" as a Wartime Story

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During World War I, S. Y. Agnon resided in Germany and witnessed the destruction of war through the physical and psychological injuries and disabilities of returning soldiers. While he managed to avoid the draft, the measures he took led to his own lengthy hospitalization. In his fiction, the ancient Hebrew term baʿal mum *(a blemished person) attained a new, modern significance. Agnon used it to describe a range of disabilities caused by industrialized labor, modern technologies, and war-related injuries. The story "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum," first published in 1920, implicitly addresses modern disabilities and their treatment. In his revision process, Agnon intensified the drama of Ovadiah's abuse by members of the Jewish community, which brings about the character's hospitalization. Drawing on scholarship in disability studies, I show how Agnon uses Ovadiah's physical and psychological suffering as a narrative crutch upon which he leans to augment the representational power of his story and expose the mistreatment of the weakest members of (Jewish) society. Within a World War I context, Ovadiah's* mumim, *or blemishes, designate not only his inability to serve God but also his deficiencies in the eyes of a society that instrumentalizes its subjects and values them only as workers or soldiers.*

In 1914, with the outbreak of World War I, the young writer Shmuʾel Yosef Czaczkes (S. Y. Agnon) was living in Germany and stood at risk of army draft to fight for the German cause. Agnon resorted to drastic measures such as excessive smoking and sleep deprivation to avoid army service. He became seriously ill and required hospitalization. The New Jewish Hospital in Wedding, Berlin, had

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opened its doors in 1914, before the outbreak of the war, and Agnon spent five months recovering at this hospital. In view of Agnon's lengthy hospitalization and the kidney illness with which he was diagnosed, this article revisits his 1920 story "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum" ("Ovadiah the Blemished") as a narrative that draws on the author's wartime experiences. Agnon's encounter with war injury on the home front, particularly during his hospital stay, informed his approach to physical injury and inborn conditions, and he continued to develop these themes more fully in his later prose works, *Oreaḥ natah lalun* (*A Guest for the Night*) and *ʿAd henah* (*To This Day*).

"ʿOvadyah baʿal mum" narrates the experiences of a disabled man who, at the start of the story, uses an antiquated wooden crutch and later receives a new, modern prosthetic device. During his hospitalization, Ovadiah is also diagnosed with a kidney disease, which must be tended to over a longer period. While this plot structure would suggest a positive transformation of the protagonist, Agnon uses the story of Ovadiah's unfulfilled relationship with his betrothed, Shayne-Serel, to counter the notion of recovery and restoration. This article draws on David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis* to explain how Agnon sets up a narrative of potential recovery only to criticize the social conditions that prohibit Ovadiah's full integration and rehabilitation. In his revised versions of "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum," Agnon initially withholds information about Ovadiah's physical conditions, which subsequently heightens their transgressive quality when they become the narrative's focus. While Ovadiah recovers from his disease and receives improved care for his disabilities within the confined setting of the hospital, Agnon uses the relationship between Shayne-Serel and Ovadiah to comment on the societal dimension of Ovadiah's condition. Despite his rehabilitation in the hospital, Ovadiah remains a derided outsider after his release, one who must come to terms with the fact that his betrothed has given birth to another man's child. Agnon thus reflects, albeit implicitly, on how modern warfare and industry have produced an unredeemable category of blemished people, *baʿalei mumim*.

HOSPITAL LETTERS

On September 16, 1916, Agnon wrote a postcard to Salman Schocken reporting that he had been admitted to the hospital after three days of serious illness.[1]

Schocken followed up and advised Agnon "to continue to be smart and do everything the doctor orders." "You can't fool around with kidney disease," Schocken warned. "For your own good, I advise you to stay in the hospital for as long as possible because I don't see how you might be able to receive the appropriate care and diet for your diseases when you are released from the hospital."[2] Schocken emphasized the potential long-term damage that can be caused by an internal disease and the need to rest until fully healed. Agnon responded with descriptions of his physicians, a few of whom could converse in Hebrew, and of his diet and convalescence conditions. During the war, many German physicians were called to the front lines and were replaced by doctors of foreign nationality. Agnon also asked Schocken for reading materials, since he was initially allowed only to read, not to sit up and write.[3]

In early October, Agnon's condition had not improved, and he complained about his bed rest, calling it "eternal rest" and comparing himself to "a dead man who remains alive [*bar minan ḥai*]." Agnon also bemoaned that the only subject of conversation was "the business of illnesses and needs of the body."[4] All the talk about diseases made things worse for him, and he would have preferred to read the books Schocken sent him and forget about his illness. In November, Agnon was finally allowed to get up and move around the hospital. He rediscovered his legs, as it were: "I am happy that God gave me legs and the doctor permission to walk."[5] A month later, Agnon reported that he had received access to a room where he could sit and write from nine in the morning until two in the afternoon. Once able to work in the hospital, Agnon described himself as a "king's son," *ben melekh*, a term that recurs in the story "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum." From *bar minan* to *ben melekh*—this is the trajectory of Agnon's hospitalization in a nutshell.

At this point, Agnon also mentioned "Professor Strauss" for the first time. Strauss had warned Agnon that if they needed the "writing room" for another patient, he would not be able to continue using it. Hermann Strauss was the director of internal medicine at the New Jewish Hospital. He was an expert on kidney diseases and ailments of the urinary system. In this pre-antibiotics era, Strauss focused on treatment through lengthy bed rest and diet. After the war, he claimed that poor nutrition and unhygienic conditions on the front lines led to a rise in

internal diseases. At the same time, Strauss also reported that many cases of bladder and kidney disease occurred on the home front, and not only among soldiers.[6] The Berlin Jewish Hospital treated infections, surgically removed bullet and bomb shards, and amputated limbs.[7] Agnon witnessed the influx of war wounded throughout the months of his hospitalization. He mentioned hearing the grunts of dying people in the room next to his own, but it remains unclear whether these were the war wounded or citizens on the home front. Agnon found reprieve in the books that Schocken sent him during his hospitalization and specifically mentioned Émile Zola's volume on Gustave Flaubert.

THE *BAʿAL MUM* IN AGNON'S WRITING

In view of Agnon's hospital bedrest during World War I, I revisit "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum" as a narrative that addresses, albeit implicitly, the human condition in war-ravaged Europe. In her study of tubercular Yiddish and Hebrew writers, Sunny Yudkoff argues that the author's body and physical self should not be sidelined. Rather, "illness has the capacity to structure a literary conversation, to direct the career of an ailing writer, to reveal a set of cultural anxieties, and to condition a set of literary choices."[8] Agnon's illness directed his career not only because it shaped his writing conditions, but also since it allowed him to read and absorb French, Russian, and German literature by Flaubert, Honoré de Balzac, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Gottfried Keller, among others. At the same time, Agnon could not avoid the everyday realities of his ailment and those of surrounding patients, the so-called "business of illness and needs of the body." These close and often uncomfortable physical encounters at the hospital shaped his writing about disability and illness in stories such as "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum." While set in the prewar period, the story of the disabled Ovadiah still speaks to these war conditions and points to the continuum in Agnon's writing between civilian and war-induced disability.

The Hebrew term *baʿal mum* defines the character of Ovadiah from the outset. It appears in the title in all versions of this tale, from its earliest handwritten stage, through the 1920 publication in the journal *Miqlat*, to its inclusion in the 1922 collection *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul*. In the 1920 version, the opening sentences read:

עובדיה שואב-מים בעל-מום הוא, אבל מעולם לא התריס כלפי מעלה. אדרבה, מעין טעם לשבח מצא במום שבו. שכן אילו היה כשאר כל אדם, אפשר היה נותן לבו על בתולה שמלעיזין עליה? עכשיו שגבן הוא ומקצת פסח וכבר נתיאש מן האשה והתורה אמרה לא טוב היות האדם לבדו, הרי לו שיינה-סריל ממש זיווג מן השמים.[9]

Ovadiah the water carrier was a blemished man, but he never berated the heavens. On the contrary, he found value in his blemishes, because if he were like other people, would he have set his heart on a girl whose reputation is smeared? Because he is hunchbacked with a slight limp and has already given up on women and the Torah says, "It is not good for a man to be alone," Shayne-Serel is truly a match made in heaven.[10]

Baʿal mum, in biblical Hebrew, literally means "the owner of a deformity." The term originates in Leviticus 21, where it denotes specific physical conditions that prevent a priest from performing sacrifices. According to Julia Watts Belser, Leviticus 21 is "a text that has been shaped by human prejudice . . . marked by human assumptions about the beautiful and good."[11] It reveals the long history of ableism and the stigma that disabled people have faced. Belser therefore prefers to translate *mumim* as "blemishes" rather than use the term "disabilities." By using "blemishes," she acknowledges and marks the stark differences between ancient and modern categories.

Among the disqualifying physical attributes mentioned in Leviticus 21, we find *piseaḥ*, "limp" (21:18), and *gibben*, "hunchbacked" (21:20), both conditions that characterize Ovadiah. In the Babylonian Talmud, the term *baʿal mum* appears in the description of mountains that were not selected to receive the Torah, in contrast to Mount Sinai. These mountains are said to have *gavnunim*, or "high peaks," which resemble the blemishes of priests who have a hunchback (*gibben*), all because they arrogantly insisted that the Torah should be received upon them.[12] According to Natan Meir, the name Ovadiah, which means "servant of God," stands in an ironic tension with the attributes of disability, since this name "suggests him to be *more* worthy of serving God, rather than less."[13] Diverging from the significance of his name, Ovadiah is a lesser servant of God.

In the 1920 *Miqlat* version, quoted above, Agnon uses the terms *baʿal mum* and *mum* three times in connection to the main character, if we count the title and opening two sentences. He also accentuates the conflict inherent to Ovadiah's existence through the reference to God (*maʿlaḥ*) in the second part of the first sentence. Ironically, the man's blemishes provide a benefit, or value ("taʿam leshevaḥ")

since this physical difference has marital consequences. Because of his status at the bottom of the social hierarchy as a water carrier and a disabled man, Ovadiah must make do with matrimony to a woman of similar standing, a servant with a bad reputation.[14] As Meir explains, Jewish outcasts in Eastern European society—the orphaned, disabled, or poor—struggled to attain a good match and even to marry at all. The unmarried were further marginalized within Jewish society, which considered independent livelihood and marriage as conditions for acceptance.

In the later iterations of the story, Agnon removed the term *baʿal mum* from the first mention of Ovadiah's name and began the story with the phrase "Ovadiah the water carrier." While readers know that this character is blemished, only at the end of the story's first section do we discover that he uses a crutch. In the subsequent section, we also learn from other characters that, in addition to his impaired legs, Ovadiah is also a hunchback. His ironic surname is Halbleyb, literally "half-life."[15] As he revised this short story, Agnon decided to avoid the immediate identification of Ovadiah as a blemished person. This strategy piques the readers' curiosity and allows us to entertain questions concerning Ovadiah's potential to heal and change.

The term *baʿal mum* appears across Agnon's writings, especially those that depict World War I and its aftermath. In his prose, *baʿal mum* is an umbrella term for both war-related injuries and acquired or inborn disabilities. In "The Doctor and his Divorcée" ("Harofe ugerushato"), the two main figures, a doctor and nurse, take an outing to the outskirts of the city and discuss hospital affairs. Since the two do not know each other well, they first discuss the hospital and its patients. They mention a "professor" who has told his kidney patients to fast once a week because one of his patients fasted on Yom Kippur and his urine test came back clear of protein.[16] Their next topic of conversation is "all the blemished people [*baʿalei mumim*] that the war has produced." This discussion, in short succession, of kidney disease and war-inflicted disability points to the continuity between the home front and the battlefield in Agnon's writing. The space of the hospital brings these two groups into close proximity. Agnon obliquely draws on his own hospitalization in this passage. In an October 6, 1916 letter to Schocken, he described himself as the only Jewish patient who opted to fast on the Day of Atonement, even though the hospital was full of all kinds of Jews (*Yehudim miYehudim shonim*).[17] In "The Doctor and his Divorcée,"

the observance of the Jewish fast day leads to a breakthrough in the treatment of patients. In this way, religious practice and medical progress appear to complement one another.

The doctor, who is also the narrator of the story, mentions how they are "content to stroll where such *baʿalei mumim* cannot be seen." He declares that they should cease to discuss the hospital and its disabled patients and focus on "happier things," but he notices the nurse's facial expression, which indicates her worry that they would be left with nothing to discuss.[18] This conversation is a preamble to the doctor's spontaneous marriage proposal. The rushed courtship during their walk revolves around the hospital and war-related injury, and it is marked by ambivalence; the pair are glad not to see blemished people, but the doctor is aware that the hospital has brought them together and provides them with shared experiences. The story raises the question of whether it is possible to focus on "happier things" like new love and marriage in a time of war and chaos. Agnon suggests that while the doctor and his beloved are not externally maimed, they still suffer from psychological injury. Their wedding takes place without "feast or joy" in a time of political turmoil, "madness and defeat."[19]

Agnon continued to foreground the continuity between diverse types of injuries and illnesses, whether civilian or war-related, in his 1939 novel *A Guest for the Night* (*Oreaḥ natah lalun*) and in his 1952 work *To This Day* (*ʿAd henah*). At the outset of the former text, the narrator assumes that "every *mum* is a result of the war," referring to World War I injuries. However, the character of Daniel Ba"ḥ, who lost his leg in a train accident, corrects this impression. Poignantly, Daniel was "physically whole" (*shalem begufo*) when engaged in army service, and his civilian responsibilities brought about his injury.[20] In the later work, *ʿAd henah*, Agnon focused on war-related disabilities, although he still portrayed the overlap between different kinds of injuries. At the outset, the narrator encounters Brigitte Shimmerman, a former actor who runs a wartime convalescent home. She states that historians should change their terminology when accounting for World War I, writing *baʿalei mumim*, "blemished people," instead of *benei adam*, "humans."[21] In other words, the war has altered the human condition, what it means to be, literally, the children of Adam. The injured soldier nicknamed "Golem" is the epitome of the *baʿal mum* in this text, even though his injury is not externally visible.

Nevertheless, Agnon also reminds his readers that *mumim* are not only a product of war but can result from a wide array of causes.

In one scene, set in a crowded Berlin café, the usual serving staff who are fighting on the front lines have been replaced by blemished people, *baʿalei mumim*, who are unfit for service. Rather than being unsuitable for holy work, these waiters, ironically, cannot contribute to the toil of war. Agnon's narrator then asserts that, because these new servers did not want to appear unfit for warfare, they pretended to "engage in the affairs of war [*ʿomdim beqishrei milḥamah*]."[22] Playing on the alliteration of *kasher* ("fit") and *qishrei* ("relations"), Agnon underscores the difficulty of telling the difference between war-related injury and other types of disability. Likewise, in another scene, the narrator hears about a publicity stunt that a publisher used when promoting a book about the golem of literary lore: "He assembled a group of invalids, arranged them according to height, and gave them placards to hold that spelled 'G-O-L-E-M.' Paraded through the streets of Leipzig during the annual fair, when the city was crowded with visitors, this human billboard made 'Golem' a household word."[23] In this story, the *baʿalei mumim*, the new humans of the early twentieth century, form a novel spectacle, a freak show of sorts. The publisher uses their disabilities to call attention to a new book about the golem, a type of blemished humanoid.

These examples reveal how Agnon plays with the term *baʿal mum* and its biblical resonances to explore how the industrial workplace and battle front have altered the human body, both internally and externally. His writings ask how we might differentiate, if at all, between those injured at war and those disabled for other reasons, especially since all humans have been replaced by *baʿalei mumim*. "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum" is a case in point because, while its plot is set in the prewar period, the story includes references that ground it in the time of composition—namely, World War I and its aftermath.

DANCING WITH A PROSTHESIS

As previously mentioned, Agnon first published "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum" in *Miqlat*, a literary journal that appeared in New York, edited by Y. D. Berkowitz and published by Shtibel. In this initial version, we learn very quickly that Ovadiah has a hump and a limp, whereas the 1922 version leaves the readers

in the dark for longer.[24] Another episode that appears early in the 1920 version and is postponed in revisions concerns the ridicule of Ovadiah as a hunchback. In the earlier version, Agnon depicts a scene in which a maid slaps Ovadiah on his hump and warns him not to fall because his hump might bore a hole in the ground.[25] This episode portrays Ovadiah's passivity and his desire to maintain a façade of cheerfulness. Agnon removed it from the 1922 version and recycled the same line about the hole in the ground in the later dance hall scene. This comparison reveals Agnon's shift from a direct and detailed account of disability and abuse in the *Miqlat* version to a more plot-driven account in the *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul* iteration, in which the ridicule and attack of Ovadiah in the dance hall scene is not part of a longer history of ongoing abuse. Consequently, the dance hall scene becomes more dramatic in the revised version, and Ovadiah's disability more transgressive.

In their study of disability in modern literary narrative, Mitchell and Snyder address the paradoxical quality of disability representation. On the one hand, literary disability can appear to destabilize "cultural prescription about the body." On the other hand, it also renders characters more deterministically, grounding their identity in the biology of their illness or disability.[26] Using the term "crutch" metaphorically, Mitchell and Snyder argue that literary narratives depend on the crutch of disability for "their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight."[27] The changes that Agnon introduced in his revision of the tale of Ovadiah showcase this claim. Ovadiah's condition is a "narrative prosthesis" for Agnon because he uses it to augment the representational power of the story and, in the second version, heighten the drama of Ovadiah's clash with members of his community gathered in the dance hall. For instance, when the young men at the dance hall begin to torment Ovadiah, after Shayne-Serel turns her back on him, Agnon writes that they "mocked him and knocked his crutch out of his arm," causing him to almost fall. In the 1920 version, someone from the crowd "pushes his crutch" and another person "pats the rounded part of his hunchback."[28] These slight differences are significant; the later version is more brutal and grotesque. Agnon describes Ovadiah as almost falling over, unable to hold onto his crutch. On a metaliterary level, as Ovadiah loses his crutch in the revised story, Agnon attains a more substantial narrative prosthesis.

In the 1922 version of "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum," Agnon initially glosses over Ovadiah's disability only to enhance its transgressive quality when the community later derides and attacks him. Moreover, in the earlier published story, Ovadiah is complicit, through his cheerfulness, with those who ridicule and harass him. In the revised version, Agnon vividly depicts how Ovadiah fights back when the crowd lifts him in the air on his crutch. He uses his arms, legs, teeth, and fingernails to fight the men until they put him down and give him back his crutch, which he holds "with both hands and leans on with all his might."[29] In this version, the crutch is Ovadiah's lifeline and not merely a torture device. Another significant alteration that Agnon made concerns Ovadiah's entreaty: when the red-headed servant, Reuven, takes the crutch away, Ovadiah protests, in 1920, that he "is a man like all of them" (*halo ish anokhi kamokhem*).[30] Agnon removed this pathetic appeal to the humanity of his tormentors in the 1922 version.

The fight scene culminates with Reuven throwing the crutch, which he tried to break, into the fire, where it catches aflame and burns. Significantly, in both 1920s versions, Ovadiah calls this act "ḥillul Shabbat," or the "desecration of the Sabbath," and in the earlier story he even names Reuven and his fellow Jews "goyyim," "non-Jews."[31] In later publications, Agnon no longer used the notion of *ḥillul Shabbat*, and he omitted Ovadiah's verbal response to this act altogether. However, from the earliest version to later editions, Ovadiah faints and collapses when he sees his crutch burning, and he appears as "a person sinking into great waters" ("keʾadam shetsolel bemayim adirim"), an allusion to Exodus 15 and the depiction of the Egyptian army drowning in the Sea of Reeds. In the biblical story, the Egyptian army is punished for chasing the Israelites after Pharaoh's change of heart.[32] Likewise, Ovadiah follows Shayne-Serel to the dance hall on Shabbat, and, although he is a victim of the men's cruel mockery, Agnon, in this ironic reference to Exodus, also imagines him as a punished persecutor. In this critical reversal, the Jewish man who complains about the transgressive behavior of his fellow Jews is the one who appears to drown rather than his tormentors who disregard the Sabbath. Moreover, after he has fainted, Agnon uses terms such as "dead man" and "'killed person'" ("heharug") to portray Ovadiah's condition even though he has not died.[33] Ovadiah's ostracization places him in an ambiguous position: the Jewish community shuns him just as he tries to appeal to Jewish tradition. They cause his metaphorical death as Jew and human, which will later enable his rebirth at the hospital.

The dance hall episode revolves around Ovadiah's prosthesis, which is a central prop and a symbolic element. Instead of Moses's staff that miraculously parts the Sea of Reeds, Agnon depicts another wooden stick—a crutch upon which a disabled man depends—that comes to symbolize the abyss separating Ovadiah from the rest of the community gathered in the establishment. Rather than providing a means for escape from torment, the men use the crutch to harass Ovadiah and desecrate the Sabbath. The man's fall and fainting is a consequence of his crutch's destruction and reveals his physical and psychological vulnerability.

THE NEW HOSPITAL

Significantly, while Ovadiah is brought to "the hospital" in the 1920 story, starting with the 1922 publication Agnon refers to this institution as "the new hospital," thereby augmenting the connection to the New Jewish Hospital in Berlin, where he was hospitalized.[34] As soon as Ovadiah arrives, against his initial will, he recognizes that he feels unwell. Rather than first treat his illness, the caretakers clean him and dress him in a new shirt. Agnon thus underscores the process of rehabilitation that the hospital sojourn entails. Before he can don his *tsitsit* ("tallit katan"), the hospital caretaker decides to wash it as well. Symbolically, Ovadiah needs to be purified to develop a stronger faith. However, while Agnon enjoyed the care and support of his patron, Schocken, during his own hospitalization, Ovadiah does not receive any visitors and remains isolated from his community at the hospital.

Agnon also reminds readers of the significance of the name Ovadiah through the encounter between the patient and the evangelical nurse who asks for his name. After he pronounces his Hebrew name, the nurse exclaims, "Obadiah!", which Agnon inserts in Latin letters.[35] She further asks if he knows that his name is that of the prophet. He responds that this is the portion of the Haftarah (excerpt from the Prophets) read on the Sabbath after the Torah portion of *Vayyishlaḥ*. Through this encounter, Ovadiah can reassert his Jewishness as he counters the nurse's anglicization of his name with his reference to the Haftarah. The single chapter of the book of Obadiah concerns the offenses of Edom against Judah and the retributions it will receive. Considering that the character of Ovadiah arrives at the hospital after the attack in the dance hall, most viciously executed by the man whom Agnon calls

"the red-head" ("haʾadmoni"), the mention of the prophet Obadiah aligns Reuven the red-head with the scorned people of Edom. Ironically, this biblical allusion concerns a man named after another Israelite tribe, Reuven, descendants of the eldest son of Jacob. Agnon further dispels the notion that "the house of Esau shall have no survivors" when Shayne-Serel, Ovadiah's betrothed, gives birth to Reuven's child while Ovadiah is still hospitalized.

The hospital discussion of his first name contrasts with the mockery of Ovadiah's last name, Halbleyb, in the dance hall. Agnon uses the same verb, *lehitpaʿel*, "to admire or be amazed at something," in both cases. In the hospital, however, the Christian nurse admires the name of the prophet, whereas in the dance hall, the Jewish man, a rabbi's helper, calls out "Welcome Mr. Halbleyb . . . as though it were strange that someone like Ovadiah had a last name."[36] Agnon contrasts the humiliation of Ovadiah in the hands of fellow Jews with his respectful treatment by a Christian nurse. Considering that the biblical text does not identify the prophet Obadiah through a last name (the name of his father) or a place of origin, the shift from dance hall to hospital also marks a return, of sorts, to the significance of the biblical name, "servant of God," and a departure from the modern surname. It makes sense, therefore, that between the 1920 and 1922 versions, Agnon removed any direct mention of the surname, Halbleyb, in the conversation with the nurse and noted only that Ovadiah "told her his last name."[37]

Ovadiah arrives at the hospital because of the attack, fight, and fall, and the narrator insists that "his wounds are light and did not constitute a disease," but a simple urine exam reveals that Ovadiah is suffering from a kidney infection, as well as edema, or swelling of the skin tissue.[38] In the first publication, Agnon inserts this diagnosis in German: "Er hat Odeme."[39] The name for the disease appears in Hebrew translation in subsequent publications, "hedreqon."[40] Agnon exchanged a term that came to German via Latin and Greek for a medieval medical term that entered Hebrew from Arabic and came to denote the now-outdated medical diagnosis of dropsy.[41] Whereas the initial use of the German diagnosis evokes Agnon's convalescence in the German hospital, the shift to a Hebrew term better coincides with the overall narrative of the New Hospital's transformation in the hands of a young, enterprising, and Zionist doctor. Furthermore, Agnon describes Ovadiah as a "king's son" who rests in a clean bed, well fed from the best foods in the world.

In addition, "not a day passes when someone doesn't show him kindness."[42] The double negative grammatical structure forces readers to attend to the miraculous fact of Ovadiah's treatment in the hospital with "ḥesed," a degree of lovingkindness. Agnon likewise described his own condition at the hospital, once he could move around, as that of a "king's son." He, too, received a kidney disease diagnosis and enjoyed better food and care in the hospital than he would have on the home front. In this manner, Agnon sets the stage for Ovadiah's recovery and potential reintegration into the Jewish society that previously shunned him.

ENTRENCHED DISABILITY

During Ovadiah's hospital stay, the doctors replace the damaged wood crutch that his antagonist, Reuven, had previously thrown into the fire with a new prosthetic device, a crutch with a rubber bottom that does not make noise. This new crutch locates the story once more in the World War I context, since it was during this war, with its masses of injured soldiers, that new materials such as rubber, metal, and leather began to be used to improve the functionality of prosthetic limbs.[43] Moreover, in contrast to the dance hall, at the hospital the doctor pats Ovadiah affectionately on his back, the place of his hump, and declares that he has become "a person" ("nihiyeita leʾish"). Rather than deny him his humanity, the hospital restores it.[44] This phrase resonates with the title of the story, "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum," and raises important questions: Can Ovadiah, identified as disabled or blemished, ever be healed and rehabilitated? Can the *baʿal mum* become God's servant once more? Rather than uphold the physician's perspective, Agnon shows how Ovadiah's rehabilitation within the hospital walls, where he received respectful treatment, is compromised when he returns to his former environment. Class and gender inequalities prevent Ovadiah's full recovery and prohibit societal change more generally.

At the end of the hospital episode, Agnon doubles back on the fantasy of recovery associated with cleanliness. To recall, the hospital attendants clean Ovadiah's clothes and body when he is first admitted. He also learns to brush his teeth and displays the toothbrush provided by the hospital in his front pocket. At the end of his hospital stay, however, his physical deformities, limp and hunchback, become

a renewed source of contamination: "And when Ovadiah would lie down on this clean bed and spread across these white sheets and rest his head on a real pillow and cover himself with a real blanket he would almost forget that he had a limp and was soiled with blemishes [*mumin*]."[45] By repeating the Hebrew adjective *mamash*, "real," in several phrases ("keset mamash" and "semikha mamash") and using the adjective "clean" alongside "white," Agnon intensifies the disparity in this sentence between Ovadiah's desire to be rid of his disabilities and his sense of being defiled by them. Even if the hospital can cure him of his kidney ailment and edema, he still limps and must use a crutch. This state of enduring disability is imagined as a source of uncleanness since Ovadiah "almost forgets" that he is dirty "melukhlakh" with his "blemishes."

Upon his release from the hospital, Ovadiah must put on his old clothes that he wore months prior. He feels ashamed of his "filthy clothes," in Hebrew *begadim tsoʾim*.[46] This term alludes to Zechariah 3, where the prophet envisions Joshua standing in soot-covered, filthy clothes before the angel of God. Joshua's clothes symbolize his misdeeds, *ʿavonot*, and the angel orders that these clothes be removed and clean clothing and a "pure head wrap" be placed on him. Ovadiah's narrative departs from this biblical text since he must wear, once more, the clothes in which he arrived, even if these are symbolically "filthy clothes" (recall that the staff cleaned them). The process of purification is only temporary in his case. At the same time, Agnon describes Ovadiah's new manner of walking as a transformation; he no longer "struts and crawls like a *baʿal mum*" but appears a delicate person or dandy ("istenis") who suffers from some ailing.[47] Instead of a permanent condition that makes Ovadiah crawl in torment, he now seems to endure a lighter disability. The *istenis* is a spoiled person, in modern Yiddish, or someone sensitive to cold, according to the rabbis. In Jewish tradition, an *istenis* can bathe during the week of mourning because lack of cleanliness will bring him even greater sorrow.[48] Significantly, the hospital stay has softened Ovadiah and enhanced his desire to be clean and improve his external appearance. As an *istenis*, Agnon implies, Ovadiah should receive better treatment by members of his community, who need to understand and appreciate his desire to remain untainted.

During the months of Ovadiah's convalescence, his betrothed, Shayne-Serel, became pregnant when Reuven, the same man who led the group of Ovadiah's

abusers, sexually assaulted her. Reuven discovers Shayne-Serel's relationship with the son of the homeowner who employs her as a maid, and uses this knowledge to force her compliance. Subsequently, Reuven denies his responsibility and abandons her to give birth alone to a baby boy after she has lost her position in the household. Upon his return, Ovadiah becomes the object of scorn for a wrong he did not commit: Shayne-Serel's impregnation. When Ovadiah finally locates his betrothed, he can hardly recognize her because of her physical change after pregnancy and birth. If before, in the dance hall scene, she towered above others while dancing, now she stagnantly leans on the house post, her chin on her chest. She slumps over her baby, whom she treats with contempt. Shayne-Serel does not respond when Ovadiah calls her name, as though she is not the same person as before.[49] She looks up at Ovadiah and "covers her heart," which could mean that she covered her chest after nursing, but it also, more literally, suggests her unwillingness to feel anything for Ovadiah or her own baby. When her infant screams, Shayne-Serel nurses him but calls the child a "bastard."[50] Whereas Ovadiah became a "king's son" during his hospital stay, Shayne-Serel lost even her lowly status as a maid and had a baby out of wedlock, positioning her at the lowest rank of Jewish society. The transformation that Ovadiah undergoes while recovering in the hospital contrasts, in this manner, with the degradation that Shayne-Serel suffers because of her gender and class. She becomes the object of multiple men's sexual exploitations and continues to reject Ovadiah, her only hope for security.

Readers can acutely sense the discrepancy between the two characters in the awkwardly painful final scene. Ovadiah cannot speak when he finally faces Shayne-Serel in her altered state. He clutches his new crutch and the candies he has bought as a gift but is unable to give them to his betrothed. He places the candies, which have melted and become sticky, in the little hand of the infant. According to Nitza Ben-Dov, Ovadiah's purchase of the candy, a gift more suitable for a child, indicates his unconscious knowledge of his betrothed's new status and even his willingness to adopt the child, to whom he hands the candy.[51] Concomitantly, we can also understand this gesture of connecting to the infant as an attempt to avoid Shayne-Serel and the "hatred" in her "green eyes." Ovadiah is unable to reach out to the woman and comfort her, so he reaches out to the child instead. He acquiesces to his new role, as Ben-Dov argues, but does not attain resolution in

terms of his own desire for a wife and companion. The two outcasts—Ovadiah the blemished and the "bastard" child—come together in a kind of black wedding of necessity, but the stickiness of the melting candy, with its erotic connotations that evoke the Song of Songs, ends up in the child's hand rather than the woman's. This moment of resolution is not a happy one, as a result, and the story culminates in resigned discomfort on behalf of the main character.

My reading of "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum" in the framework of World War I and the medical progress of this period reveals Agnon's heightened focus on the physicality of his protagonist and his recovery process. As Alice Hall contends in the context of American writing: "fiction can also challenge the 'rehabilitative contract' by placing disability center stage. . . . Instead of hiding away difference and disability, these are stories about exposure."[52] Agnon exposes the undesirable side of Jewish society in this story: the mistreatment of disabled men and lower-class women. He also challenges the ideal notion that these two types of people might find a positive connection and resolution in matrimony. "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum" is thus a story about the fall and only partial recovery of the "blemished" man. The social circumstances within the Jewish community and the mistreatment of women and men of lower status are what bring about Ovadiah's physical, psychological, and social decline and inability to fully rehabilitate.

"ʿOvadyah baʿal mum" is part of a larger corpus of Agnon's writings that contend more explicitly with the ravages of World War I. *Mumim*, in Agnon's texts, are overdetermined and, because of his wartime experiences in Germany, they have a broader societal connotation. For Agnon, the human being as damaged goods is a product of both industrialized labor and modern warfare. "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum" depicts disability at a remove from the war through the eyes of a man who cannot actualize his desires despite his intentions and rehabilitation process. And, in the center of a story set in a prewar past, Agnon places the modern hospital as an ironic site of cleanliness, efficiency, and friendliness. Just as Ovadiah cannot forget that he is "soiled with blemishes," so we, the readers, are urged to remember the devastation of war and acknowledge that the weakest members of society—women, children, disabled people, poor people, and foreigners—are always caught in the crossfire.

NOTES

1 Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon and Shlomo Zalman Schocken, *Ḥilufei iggerot* (Schocken, 1991), 30.

2 Agnon and Schocken, *Ḥilufei iggerot*, 32.

3 Agnon and Schocken, *Ḥilufei iggerot*, 33.

4 Agnon and Schocken, *Ḥilufei iggerot*, 34.

5 Agnon and Schocken, *Ḥilufei iggerot*, 35.

6 Dagmar Hartung-von Doetinchem and Rolf Winau, *Zerstörte Fortschritte. Das Jüdische Krankenhaus in Berlin, 1756, 1861, 1914, 1989* (Hentrich, 1989), 95–96.

7 Hartung-von Doetinchem and Winau, *Zerstörte Fortschritte*, 91, 93.

8 Sunny S. Yudkoff, *Tubercular Capital: Illness and the Conditions of Modern Jewish Writing* (Stanford University Press, 2019), 19.

9 Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon, "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum," *Miqlat* 5, no. 15 (1920): 386.

10 My translation.

11 Julia Watts Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones: Disbility Wisdom and the Spiritual Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole* (Beacon, 2023), 64.

12 b. Megillah 29a, 10

13 Natan M. Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl: The Destitute, Disabled, and Mad of Jewish Eastern Europe, 1800–1939* (Stanford University Press, 2020), 201.

14 Meir, *Stepchildren*, 9–10.

15 Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon, "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum," in *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul. Sippurei ahavim* (Jüdischer Verlag, 1922), 31, 34.

16 Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon, "Harofe ugrushato," *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul*, in *Kol sippurav shel Shmuʾel Yosef ʿAgnon* (Schocken, 1966), 471.

17 Agnon and Schocken, *Ḥilufei iggerot*, 34.

18 Agnon, "Harofe," 471.

19 Agnon, "Harofe," 474–75.

20 Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon, *Oreaḥ natah lalun* (Schocken, 1998).

21 Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon, *ʿAd henah* (Schocken, 1998), 11–12.

22 Agnon, *ʿAd henah*, 63.

23 Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon, *To This Day*, trans. Hillel Halkin (Toby, 2008), 70 (my amendment).

24 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1920), 386.

25 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1920), 386–87.

26 David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (University of Michigan Press, 2000), 50.

27 Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 49.

28 Agnon, "ʿOvadiyah" (1922), 33; Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1920), 390.

29 Agnon, "ʿOvadiyah" (1922), 34.

30 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1920), 391.

31 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1920), 391.

32 Agnon, *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul*, 412.

33 Agnon also changed the biblical verb forms of "vayitʿalef vayippol" to the modern verb forms for the past tense, "nitʿalef venafal," rendering the scene less archaic.

34 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1920), 392; Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1922), 35.

35 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1922), 36–37.

36 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1922), 34.

37 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1922), 37.

38 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1922), 38.

39 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1920), 396. Agnon might have used the Germanic "Odeme" initially also as a wordplay with the Hebrew *Odem* or *Adom*, the color red, to represent the red-head Reuven, Ovadiah's nemesis. The disease is an affliction of the skin possibly contracted because of the violent encounter with Reuven.

40 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1922), 38.

41 Gerrit Bos, *Novel Medical and General Hebrew Terminology from the 13th Century* (Brill, 2018), 42.

42 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1922), 39. See Scheindlin's translation on p. 42 of this volume.

43 See, e.g., Heather Perry, *Recycling the Disabled: Army, Medicine, and Modernity in WWI Germany* (Manchester University Press, 2015).

44 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1922), 40.

45 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1922), 40.

46 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1922), 46.

47 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1922), 46. Cf. Scheindlin's translation on p. 116 of this volume.

48 Joseph Karo, Shulḥan Arukh, *Yoreh deʾah*, *Ashlei Ravrevei* 381:3.

49 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1922), 50.

50 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah" (1922), 50.

51 Nitza Ben-Dov, "Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* and the Symbol of the Crutch in Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon's "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum,'" *Prooftexts* 41, nos. 2–3 (2025): 133.

52 Alice Hall, "Prostheses," in *Technology and Literature*, ed. Adam Hammond (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 165.