PROJECT MUSE

Victor Hugoâ€™s *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* and the Symbol of the Crutch in ShmuÊ¾el Yosef Agnonâ€™s â€œÊ¿Ovadyah baÊ¿al mumâ€•

Nitza Ben-Dov

Prooftexts, Volume 41, Number 2-3, 2025, pp. 122-135 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.2979/ptx.00018*

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/971144

[165.123.34.86] Project MUSE (2026-01-14 15:02 GMT) University of Pennsylvania (+2 other institution accounts)

Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* and the Symbol of the Crutch in Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon's "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum"

NITZA BEN-DOV
University of Haifa, Israel

This article begins with a discussion of the influence of Victor Hugo's monumental novel, The Hunchback of Notre-Dame, *on Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon's story "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum." It then proceeds to deal with a motif that runs like a scarlet thread throughout the story, that of Ovadiah's crutch, which Red Reuven, a modern incarnation of the biblical Esau, fails to break and thus throws into the furnace to burn. The eternal, archetypal struggle between Jacob and Esau is embodied in the form of the burned crutch, as well as through Ovadiah's name, which points us to the Torah portion of* Vayishlaḥ *and the Haftarah for this portion: the single chapter that comprises the biblical book of Obadiah, which speaks of the fire from the house of Jacob that will consume the house of Esau. The article suggests an optimistic ending to the story, which seems on the surface open-ended and ironic, with no potential remedy. The optimistic reading draws support, among other things, from the Torah portion of* Nitsavim *and an episode from 1 Kings. Additional support comes once again from Hugo's* The Hunchback of Notre-Dame.

The title of Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon's 1920 story "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum" literally means "Ovadiah the Blemished" or "Ovadiah the Deformed."[1] Raymond Scheindlin's decision to bypass these literal options and render the title as specifying one blemish in particular—"Ovadiah the Hunchback"—highlights Victor Hugo's monumental novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831) as a potential source of inspiration for Agnon's tale.[2] Indeed, Ovadiah's hump plays a central

PROOFTEXTS 41, 2025, 122–135.
Copyright © Prooftexts Ltd. • doi: 10.2979/ptx.00018.

[165.123.34.86] Project MUSE (2026-01-14 15:02 GMT) University of Pennsylvania (+2 other institution accounts)

role in Agnon's story, even if not mentioned overtly in the *baʿal mum* of the title. When Ovadiah enters the dance hall, after much hesitation and anxiety, the hump on his back triggers the abusive treatment he suffers. The young men in the dance hall knock down his crutch, and, when he bends over to retrieve it, his hump pulls him to the ground, drawing ridicule from the onlookers. The teacher's assistant, whom Ovadiah is surprised to find at the decadent dance hall, drums on his hump and mockingly asks, "Would the gentleman perhaps like to dance?"[3] Ovadiah's disability becomes the focus of attention at the dance hall, and the revelers sing a playful song to mock the person who has entered a place where he does not belong. His distorted body is described in the song they improvise to humiliate him: "A new dancer enters the hall (*bayit*) / a crude hump, a body like an olive (*zayit*)."[4]

The rhyming Hebrew words *bayit* ("hall," "house") and *zayit* ("olive") emphasize the disproportion between the large, eruptive hump and the small (olive-sized) body that must carry this burden. This sonic similarity creates a contrasting analogy between the first and second lines. While the spacious hall (*bayit*) can accommodate a crowd of revelers, the olive (*zayit*)—that is, Ovadiah's body—cannot bear the heavy load, the hump on his back, and needs a crutch to keep its balance. Prior to Ovadiah's release from a year-long stay in the hospital, he is given a new crutch. He can then go out to the garden at the hospital and really enjoy the sun and its warmth. "Even his hump no longer weighs down his back, or pulls him down to the ground"[5]—that is, like the hunchback from Notre Dame, the hump has a "place of honor" among Ovadiah's numerous deformities. It contorts his body and makes him dependent on a crutch for support.

Besides the fact that Ovadiah is a hunchback, the connection to *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* is also reflected in the reveling in the dance hall, not something one would expect on the holy Sabbath. In Hugo's novel, the hunchback and others fall in love with the beautiful gypsy, Esmeralda, who dances with a goat in the cathedral's courtyard. Shayne-Serel, the wayward handmaid, who dances with reckless lads, is her counterpart in Agnon's story.

Ovadiah's last name appears only once in the text. In another place, where Ovadiah is asked to say it, Agnon refrains from letting the name be pronounced again. The first and only time we hear his last name is when the teacher's assistant "greets" Ovadiah before drumming on his hump: "Welcome Mr. Halbleyb."[6]

Halbleyb, which Scheindlin translates here in this volume as "Halfman," literally means "half alive" and echoes the name of Hugo's protagonist, Quasimodo, which means "half-backed" or "half-done."[7] This is probably the reason why the name "Halbleyb" is mentioned only once in the story: Agnon was reluctant to reveal the clear link between the names of the two protagonists, names that call attention to their disabilities and imperfections.

But the connection between the two names broadens when it becomes evident that they convey not only insult but also sanctity. While the Hebrew root *ʿayin-bet-dalet* means "slave," the word becomes "servant of God" when the letters *yod* and *heh* are added to spell "Ovadiah." Ovadiah is the name of a biblical prophet (usually spelled Obadiah in English), one of the twelve Minor Prophets. Although he is a "minor" prophet and his text is very short, comprising only one chapter with twenty-one verses, his prophecy was important in the ongoing struggle between Israel and Edom that underlies the tale of "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum."

The name of Hugo's protagonist also conveys more than one meaning. As noted, it can mean "half-done" and signify something that is not whole. But the name is also related to the prayer chanted on "Quasimodo Sunday," a week after Easter. The prayer begins with the Latin words "Quasi modo geniti infants, rationabiles, sine dolo lac concupiscite." In translation, this means "As newborn [i.e., "partially formed"] babes desire pure spiritual milk, without guile." This is a comparison of new converts to the Roman Catholic faith who, like the newborn, suckle pure milk and are thus "saved." In this light, the priest Claude Frollo believes he is the savior of the "partially formed" child whom he rescues, adopts, baptizes, and names "Quasimodo." Frollo finds the deformed infant at the entrance to the cathedral on Quasimodo Sunday. The Christian prayer's depiction of infants, still untainted with hypocrisy, corresponds to the ending of "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum," where an infant suckles from his mother's breast at the entrance to one of the houses.

At this point in my remarks, I will put aside *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*'s influence on "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum" and turn to a motif that I will use to present an optimistic interpretation of the story's denouement. Indeed, most readers and commentators see the story ending in irony, with two protagonists stuck in a situation with no way out. I will start by comparing the crutch in "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum," which is crucial for enabling the disabled Ovadiah to get around, to the walking stick

[165.123.34.86] Project MUSE (2026-01-14 15:02 GMT) University of Pennsylvania (+2 other institution accounts)

in Agnon's novel, *Sippur pashut* (*A Simple Story*). When Tsirl sees the psychological decline of her son, Hirshl, who is married to Mina, she does not hesitate to consult with clever people in Szybusz. One of her customers is the new physician's mother, who on behalf of her son recommends taking walks in the fresh air. Therefore,

> when it grew dark, she [Tsirl, Hirshl's mother] placed his *walking stick* in his hand and told him, "Hirshl, it's a nice time of day for a walk. Put on your coat and go and fill your lungs with fresh air and you'll eat your dinner with appetite." Hirshl put on his coat and went out, *stick in hand*. And from then on, every day before closing the shop, Tsirl places his *walking stick* in his hand and tells him, "Put on your coat and go out and enjoy yourself"[8]

The walking stick, mentioned three times in one short paragraph in *A Simple Story*, is very different from the crutch that appears many times in "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum." The first is a lordly, decorative accessory. The second is like a third leg enabling the disabled man to walk; it is part of his body, a replacement for one of his limbs, an essential accessory. Moreover, it is an essential accessory (motif) for understanding "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum." Leaning on this crutch/motif, I wish to propose a sort of a happy ending to the naturalistic, lustful, and violent story, whose bluntness and crudeness, foul language and raw descriptions of abuse and even a brutal rape, are to a great extent an antithesis of the restraint and understatement that characterize Agnon's poetics.

In the first scene of the story, the lame hunchback, Ovadiah, after long hesitation and mental preparation, gathers his courage, takes hold of his crutch, kicks (*baʿat*) to open the door and enters the dance hall, where his fiancée, Shayne Serel, is dancing excitedly and sensually with dull-witted rascals. The crutch in his hand and the kick with his leg are meant to cloak his fears and demonstrate determination and manliness in a place he views as a lion's den or hornet's nest.

Ovadiah enters the dance hall with the aim of appealing to his fiancée to stop her wanton behavior and thus prove that she belongs to him. He hopes this will lead to intimate contact with her. He makes his appeal by whispering into her ear while leaning on his crutch. The tall and beautiful Shayne Serel has become a

laughingstock, and Ovadiah seeks to save her honor and his own. She stoops toward him and replies sarcastically: "Ovadiah, don't you want me to dance with them? [. . .] In that case, *you* come and dance with me turned her back, and went away.' And she immediately turned and walked away."[9] Her derisive or angry treatment of him encourages the young men in the dance hall to torment him sadistically:

> When the boys saw that Shayne Serel had booted him (*baʿatah vo*), they ganged up and made fun of him, and knocked his crutch out from under his arm. He bent down and picked it up, but when he bent down he nearly collapsed and fell. They began shouting at him from all sides: 'Watch out, Ovadiah, that you don't make a hole in the floor with your hump!'" (*hizaher ʿOvadiah shelo tiqqov ḥatotratkha ḥor baqarqaʿ*).[10]

It should be noted that the verb Agnon chose for "not making a hole" (*shelo tiqov*) in the floor is a cognate of the Hebrew word for crutch (*qav*). Shayne Serel's metaphorical booting (*baʿatah*) of Ovadiah serves as a counterpoint to Ovadiah's physical kick (*baʿat*) at the door of the dance hall. In both cases Agnon uses the very same Hebrew root (*bet-ʿayin-tet*). As in the Bible, the reuse of the same root or a rare noun is Agnon's way to draw analogies or to call for comparisons. Similarly, a contrast is produced between Ovadiah's firm grip on the crutch, which infuses him with confidence and steadies him, and the blow that knocks it from his hand and leads to his ugly fall, which makes him look ridiculous in the eyes of the masculine collective that rises up against him.

The young ladies in the dance hall do not stand idly by. They join in tormenting Ovadiah, reaching out their bare arms, tugging him from side to side, adding to the humiliation he has suffered from Shayne Serel and the crowd of male roughnecks. When Shayne Serel rejects him, she refrains from touching him. But the young women who come to imitate her, "each of them saying, 'Ovadiah, dance with me,'" hurt him both verbally and physically.

The ladies thrust their hands toward Ovadiah as if to honor the victim, but this actually is an aggressive and embarrassing act, a sort of rape. A similar incident occurs in *A Simple Story*. There, an engagement party is organized for Hirshl and Mina on the last day of Hanukah, at the home of Mina's friend Sophia Gildenhorn.

[165.123.34.86] Project MUSE (2026-01-14 15:02 GMT) University of Pennsylvania (+2 other institution accounts)

Hirshl is trapped in a house full of drunken card players. At first it is Sophia who "grabbed Hirshl and shook his hand until her face turned red." Then, "everyone encircled Hirshl and Mina, some shook her hand and some shook his hand."[11] The onslaught of hands widens into a forest of arms that shake Hirshl's arms, something akin to a collective rape: "Swarms of arms embraced Hirshl's arms and shook them with great affection and congratulated him."[12] The arm, the leg, and the crutch are well-known phallic symbols that Agnon usually employs in a subtle way. But, in light of the intense and blatant use of these symbols, especially the crutch, it seems that Agnon chose in "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum" to diverge from his usual nuanced and indirect approach.

The abuse delivered via the crutch reaches a climax when one of the revelers at the dance hall, Red Reuven, "takes command." Reuven is a mixed incarnation of his biblical namesake, who desecrates his father Jacob's bed ("And Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine," Genesis 35:22), and of red Esau, the eternal, archetypical adversary of Jacob. "Redhead" here is a translation of *admoni* (ruddy), the very word used in the biblical text regarding the birth of Esau, who will become the father of the nation called "Edom."

Back to the story, where two young men, under Reuven's command, snatch the crutch from the cripple, insert it between his legs, and lift him up, singing a silly song, so that Ovadiah's humiliation will be not only seen but also heard. The embarrassing scene is described as follows: "Perched on his crutch, Ovadiah seemed to be teetering in the air, and he was flailing with his hands and kicking with his feet and biting with his teeth and scratching with his nails until they put him down and gave him back his crutch."[13] The crutch that Ovadiah depends on to stand and move about becomes a double-edged sword. The revelers use it to lift the disabled man, in full view of everyone, as if perched upon his sexual organ. This harsh scene ends when they return his crutch. Even for his tormentors, there is a limit to the humiliating act and a need to return the life support to the cripple. Indeed, when the crutch is returned, "He held the crutch in both hands and leaned on it with all his weight."[14]

But not for long. Red Reuven is not pleased to see the crutch returned to its owner because, from his perspective—so it seems—the crutch is a reminder of the disabled man's latent sexual potency. Indeed, when they place the crutch between Ovadiah's legs, they are able to lift his entire body. The redhead's eyebrows stand "up

erect" and are "nearly sticking into Ovadiah's eyes";[15] he grabs the crutch from him again and tries to break it. All of these phallic actions, including the snatching of the crutch and the attempt to break it, indicate that Reuven, a servant in the same household as the handmaid Shayne-Serel, views Ovadiah as his erotic competitor.

I think it is odd that Gershon Shaked, who devoted a long commentary to the story, failed to note the explicit fact that Red Reuven is unable to break the crutch. According to Shaked, "the redhead is the source of evil in the protagonist's world, and in the world of the female protagonist. *He's the one who breaks Ovadiah's crutch* and he's the one who jumps on her."[16] But here the commentary ignores the fact that the disabled Ovadiah (like the biblical Jacob) and Shayne Serel (whose double name encompasses Bilhah and Zilpah, Jacob's two concubines) may yet prevail over Red Reuven, the modern Jewish Esau.

The failure of Red Reuven to break Ovadiah's crutch is important for understanding the struggle between the two and is described as follows:

> Red took the crutch and put it on his knees to break it. But the crutch was solid and his knee joints nearly cracked apart. The pain made his blood boil and he was overcome with rage. He took the crutch and hurled it into the stove. The flame began to lick at it and burn it.[17]

All of the reddish colors of the redhead—the boiling blood and the burning fire—are mobilized to overcome the hardness of the crutch, which is a synecdoche for the unbreakable Ovadiah. In the end, the sturdy crutch can be disposed of only by being tossed into the furnace and burned.

Ovadiah, deprived of his crutch, is led unwillingly to the new hospital. It was formerly a poorhouse (*heqdesh*) for those suffering "from even the most disgusting ailments, as well as for robbers who traveled from district to district," but is now a modern hospital, the symbol of a welfare society that extends free assistance and medical care to every patient and burial to every person.[18] From the perspective of Agnon the historian, this is an opportunity to note the history of the poorhouse that was transformed into a modern hospital.[19] For Agnon the writer, it is an opportunity to make an analogy between the inglorious end of the poorhouse and of Ovadiah and his crutch. Just as the members of his community had abused Ovadiah

[165.123.34.86] Project MUSE (2026-01-14 15:02 GMT) University of Pennsylvania (+2 other institution accounts)

and his crutch, dispatching the crutch into the fire and turning Ovadiah into a bag of bones ("his limbs began to hurt as though his joints had burst and his bones had split apart"[20]), the locals had destroyed the poorhouse, ripping off its doors, doorsills, and doorposts, "and then the great fire came along and burned down the rest, and nothing was left of the building but a pile of stones."[21]

Would life return to those bones of Ovadiah? Would the pile of stones at the poorhouse be restored? Agnon concludes the section on the history of the place with these words: "In a short time, the house became a blessing to the town."[22] I wish to show that, after the burning of the crutch, which had prevented Ovadiah from moving about freely and confined him to the hospital, a time of rehabilitation will come. The story of Jacob and the angel at the Jabbok crossing, prior to his meeting with his brother Esau, ends with the dawning of a new day: "The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping on his hip" (Genesis 32:32). Perhaps, in the end, the sun will also rise upon the stunted and ridiculed counterpart of the patriarch Jacob in the tale of "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum," bringing an end to his suffering, his humiliation, and his long hiatus from his work as a drawer of water, his fiancée, and his life in the community.

Ovadiah fears the hospital at first because of his superstitions and low self-esteem, but ultimately finds peace for his body and soul there. Readers and commentators often view his long stay there as a case of cynical exploitation of the welfare society. Indeed, Agnon provides grounds for this perception: "Ovadiah lies on a clean bed like a prince, and they feed him the finest foods the world has to offer. Not a day goes by when they do not show him some kindness."[23] Likewise, "Ovadiah [. . .] your room and board are given you for free, and whereas you used to grind your bones without ever earning enough for a decent meal, now you eat as much meat as you want."[24]

As usual, however, Agnon presents two opposing sides to every question, so we can also attribute responsibility for the long hospital stay to the hospital itself: When one nurse detects protein in his urine[25] and another nurse (or perhaps the same nurse) explains that he is "Outwardly healthy, sickly within,"[26] they forbid him—upon the doctor's orders—from getting out of bed. In fact, he was unable to get out of bed until, right before Rosh Hashanah, he receives "a new crutch with a rubber tip on the bottom, and when he walks, he makes no noise."[27] The disabled

man's dependence on the crutch thus prevents him not only from leaving the hospital, but also from getting out of bed. His obedience, his acceptance of his fate, his tendency to see the positive side in every situation, his inability to make demands, his sense of gratitude, and his ability to wait patiently for others to decide what to do with him—that is, his easygoing, passive, and submissive nature—prolong the intolerable stay at the hospital, which he had preferred to leave after two or three days.

The humane treatment accorded to Ovadiah, who is accustomed to disparagement, undoubtedly captures his heart and prevents him from making demands. On the contrary, it builds his trust in the physicians and nurses. Immediately upon entering the hospital, the honorable side of his double-edged name is emphasized. The foreign evangelical nurse marvels at his name, knowing that "Obadiah" is the name of a prophet. (Agnon writes the name in Latin letters to reflect the way the nurse pronounces it—with a "b" sound instead of a "v" sound.) The flattered Ovadiah notes that the biblical text bearing his name is the Haftarah for the *Vayishlaḥ* Torah portion. This bit of information is not intended for the evangelist, whose knowledge is limited to recognizing Ovadiah as the name of a prophet. Instead, it is intended for Agnon's readers, especially as it gives Ovadiah a rare opportunity to be proud of himself.

Vayishlaḥ recounts the return of Jacob to Canaan after a long stay with his uncle in Haran, where he had fled in fear of being killed by his brother Esau. Upon reaching the threshold to the Land of Israel, Jacob sends angels to appease Esau. At night, Jacob becomes disabled after a tough struggle with an angel. The angel fails to defeat him but hurts him in a different way: "And he saw that he had not won out against him and he touched his hip socket and Jacob's hip socket was wrenched as he wrestled with him" (Genesis 32:26). Red Reuven's futile attempt to break Ovadiah's sturdy crutch, which leads him finally to burn it, can be seen as an Agnonic version of the angel's ineffective attempt to break Jacob.

The Haftarah of *Vayishlaḥ*—the one and only chapter of the book of Obadiah—centers around the hostile relations between the Israelites and Edomites. One verse in this text highlights the relevance of the shortest of the Minor Prophets to the story of "Ovadiah the Cripple": "And the House of Jacob shall be a fire, and the House of Joseph a flame, and the House of Esau shall be straw, and they shall ignite

[165.123.34.86] Project MUSE (2026-01-14 15:02 GMT) University of Pennsylvania (+2 other institution accounts)

them and consume them. And the house of Esau shall have no survivor, for the Lord has spoken" (Obadiah 1:18). The nurse who is thrilled by the name "Ovadiah" asks the new patient also to state his last name. Since his last name, "Halbleyb" ("half-alive"), is liable to detract from the honor accorded to his first name and also reveal once again the connection to the name of Hugo's protagonist, Agnon prefers not to mention it again. We know only that Ovadiah complied with her request: "And what is your family name?" the nurse asks. "He told her his family name."[28] It is worth noting that in the original printing of the story, in 1921, Agnon does in fact repeat Ovadiah's last name in that second scene, where the nurse asks for his name.[29] Agnon's removal of that line in later printings thus seems to be deliberate.

The same nurse also tucks a glass tube into his armpit, and it is the first time Ovadiah has ever seen a thermometer. She also gives him a toothbrush and comb. He enjoys fiddling with all three of these phallic-shaped objects, but the crutch, which is so vital for him and could shorten his hospital stay, is a long time in coming. Once it arrives, however, the new crutch has qualities that surpass those of the crutch that was tossed into the furnace. The new, belated crutch echoes the motif of Ovadiah's belated return to his fiancée, who has meanwhile given birth to another man's child. The other man is none other than Red Reuven, the ruffian who burned the first crutch and raped his fiancée. On the eve of the last Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah, Ovadiah departs from the hospital armed with a new crutch and the toothbrush, which conspicuously protrudes from his coat pocket, "in the upper part of his coat, so that it would be visible."[30]

He sets out for the city, about a half hour away, to meet his fiancée. Since entering the hospital a year ago, he has not heard a word about her goings-on. He reaches her after several stops and delays. All along the way, it is hinted that her situation today is unlike what it was prior to Ovadiah's year of exile at the hospital. The date when he finally stands before her (*nitsav* in Hebrew), a week before Rosh Hashanah, was carefully chosen by Agnon. Besides being a subtle reminder of Quasimodo Sunday, which falls a week after Easter, the last Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah is when the *Nitsavim* portion is read in the synagogue. The portion tells about the renewal of the covenant between the Israelites and their God. Like the first covenant at Mount Horeb, it includes all of the people of Israel, even the inferior ones—the outcasts and the despised. The opening verses emphasize the

inclusiveness of the covenant: "You are stationed [*nitsavim*] here today *all of you*, *atem nitsavim hayom kulkhem*, before the Lord your God, your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your overseers, every man of Israel. Your little ones, your wives, and your sojourner who is in the midst of your camps, from hewers of your wood to drawers of your water" (Deuteronomy 29:9–10).

Hewers of wood and drawers of water have always had the lowest status in society, but at this great moment of renewing the covenant they are an integral part of God's community. By analogy, Ovadiah, the disabled water drawer, stands [*nitsav*] before his fiancée, Shayne Serel, with the aim of renewing his covenant with her. Even before meeting her and her son, he believes he has a mystical connection with her: "Come, look, Serele, darling, we are like a single body! Just as it is with the body, when one limb is sick the whole body feels it, so are we; as soon as I fell sick, you fell sick just like me. Thank God we're both back on our feet and well again![31]

Against the backdrop of the tense meeting between the two sick outcasts, exiled from the Jewish community, whose meeting takes place at the doorway of one of the houses, we can grin sardonically at the words Ovadiah rehearsed before meeting his fiancée, a child at her breast. But we can also see this as Ovadiah's acceptance of her and her infant. Just as a superfluous addendum is attached to his back, he lovingly accepts Shayne Serel with the new addendum attached to her breast, the redheaded infant placed on her heart, gripping "his mother's breast with all ten fingers" and nursing "contentedly and with a soft murmuring sound."[32]

We cannot ignore Agnon's choice of the phrase "a soft murmuring sound" (*qol demamah daqqah*) to describe the nursing baby. This phrase, often translated as "a still small voice" recalls a rare appearance of God, when He reveals Himself to Elijah the prophet who is fleeing from Jezebel to the Sinai desert. The Lord of Hosts reveals Himself to Elijah at Mount Horeb, the site of the covenant. There is a mighty wind, an earthquake, and a fire. But the Lord is not in the wind, earthquake or fire; His revelation comes in "a soft murmuring sound" (1 Kings 19:11–12). Similarly, Shayne Serel and her son are revealed to Ovadiah and his new quiet crutch as the infant suckles his mother's milk with a soft murmuring sound, renewing a covenant after fleeing from tormentors.

[165.123.34.86] Project MUSE (2026-01-14 15:02 GMT) University of Pennsylvania (+2 other institution accounts)

Before his meeting with Shayne Serel, Ovadiah enters a shop and buys her candies. Candy is usually a gift for a child, so it seems that Ovadiah knows, at a suppressed level of his consciousness, the results of his belated return. The purchase of the candy prior to meeting his fiancée and her baby reflects Ovadiah's optimistic nature, as described by the narrator: "But Ovadiah was not one to keep on sorrowing for long, and every sorrow comes with some consolation."[33] When the baby, who clutches at his mother's breast with his two hands and ten fingers, drinks his fill of her milk and releases one hand from the breast, Ovadiah, who is holding the melting candies in his right hand and his new crutch in his left, places the candies in the baby's free hand. The two hands—the baby's hand, released from the breast, and Ovadiah's hand, released from the crutch—meet, and a connection is made, a sort of covenant, between two males whose limbs are not fully formed. And this occurs even though it presumably infuriates the baby's biological parents.

The biological father had struggled with the hardness of Ovadiah's old crutch until finally burning it. In its place, Ovadiah had received a new crutch, an improved and quiet model with a rubber tip. The mother's green eyes fill with anger toward Ovadiah and the baby. Ovadiah responds with silence: "his mouth was open and his tongue lay in it like a stone that is too heavy to turn."[34] After the fire and anger, it seems that the time has come for a soft murmuring sound. Amidst a new stillness, the baby, satiated with his mother's milk, receives comforting sweet candies from his adoptive father.

Here it is befitting to present again the section quoted at the opening of this essay—namely, the Christian liturgy recited at the beginning of the first Sunday after Easter that welcomes the "partly formed" people entering under the wings of the Roman Catholic faith, the prayer that gave the adopted Quasimodo, the protagonist of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, his name: "Like new-born babes, alleluia, desire pure spiritual milk without guile, alleluia. Rejoice to God our Helper; sing aloud to the God of Jacob" (1 Peter 2:2). In the Christian prayer, the babies imbibe spiritual milk. In Agnon's naturalistic Jewish tale, Shayne Serel's baby, born out of wedlock, suckles earthly mother's milk. What is common to all babies who have yet to sin is that they suckle pure milk without inhibition or guilt. For this reason, as the prayer tells us, we should sing our praises to the God of Jacob.

NOTES

1 Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon, "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum," in *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul* (Schocken, 1953, 1978), 408–28. Translations are from Raymond Scheindlin, *Ovadiah the Hunchback*, above pp. 100–121.

2 Raymond Scheindlin's translation is on pp. 100–121 of this issue.

3 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 410; Scheindlin, 103.

4 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 411. In the translation included in this issue, Raymond Scheindlin adapts this for rhyme and meter as "Someone new / Has joined the party / A great big hump / And a tiny body," the latter the reference to the *zayit* ("olive"). See p. 103 of this issue.

5 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 417; Scheindlin, 109.

6 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 410; Scheindlin, 103.

7 Ziva Shamir, *Hanitsanum nirʾu baʾarets* (Safra, 2021), 194–97, like Gershon Shaked, *The Narrative Art of Agnon* (Sifriyat Hapoʿalim, 1976); Nathan M. Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl* (Stanford University Press, 2020); and David Roskies (in an oral response to this article), argues that Agnon was influenced in this story by Mendele Mokher Seforim's *The Book of Beggars*, and that Mendele was influenced by *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. The clearest indication of this is the semantic similarity of the names Quasimodo and Halbleyb.

8 Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon, *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul* (Schocken, 1978), 183, emphasis mine.

9 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 410; Scheindlin, 102.

10 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 410; Scheindlin, 102–103.

11 Agnon, *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul*, 108.

12 Agnon, *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul*, 113.

13 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 411; Scheindlin, 104.

14 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 412; Scheindlin, 104.

15 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 412; Scheindlin, 104.

16 Shaked, *Narrative Art*, 194, emphasis mine.

17 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 412; Scheindlin, 104.

18 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 413; Scheindlin, 105.

19 For the historian's perspective of the *heqdesh* in "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum" see Meir, *Stepchildren*, 85–87.

20 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 412; Scheindlin, 104.

21 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 412; Scheindlin, 105.

22 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 412; Scheindlin, 105.

23 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 416; Scheindlin, 108.

24 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 418; Scheindlin, 109–110.

25 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 416; Scheindlin, 108.

26 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 422; Scheindlin, 114.

27 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 417; Scheindlin, 109.

28 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 414; Scheindlin, 106.

29 S. Y. Agnon, "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum," *Miqlat* 5 (Tishrei/Kiskev, 1920), 394.

30 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 425; Scheindlin, 115.

31 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 427; Scheindlin, 118.

32 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 428. In his translation included in this issue, Scheindlin translates the phrase *qol demamah daqah* as "muttering quietly," in keeping with a more ironic reading of the story. See p. 119 in this volume.

33 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 418; Scheindlin, 109.

34 Agnon, "ʿOvadyah," 418; Scheindlin, 119.