â€œAnd He Closed His Eyes from the Weight of What He Heardâ€•: On the Theology of (Unfulfilled) Incest in the Story â€œSisterâ€•

Tafat Hacohen-Bick

Prooftexts, Volume 41, Number 2-3, 2025, pp. 18-39 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.2979/ptx.00014*

"And He Closed His Eyes from the Weight of What He Heard"

On the Theology of (Unfulfilled) Incest in the Story "Sister"

TAFAT HACOHEN-BICK
Polonsky Academy, Van Leer Jerusalem Institute

This article examines the short story "Sister." Drawing on Agnon's nuanced portrayal of love and desire, it argues that "Sister" uniquely engages with the tension between secular and religious narratives of sin. While many works of early twentieth-century Hebrew literature associate sin with vitality and transgression, "Sister" challenges this paradigm, offering a meditation on the melancholy of sin and the sorrow that accompanies forbidden desire. The article also explores the term religyoziyut *("religiosity") in Hebrew texts since the late nineteenth century, arguing that it paradoxically describes a secular concept that often opposes traditional religion. Religiosity, as understood in this context, involves a rejection of Jewish law, while being associated with spontaneity, emotional authenticity, and sin. It highlights Agnon's distinct understanding of love, compared to Pinchas Sadeh. Unlike Sabbatean theological conceptions that celebrate the antinomic and the transgressive, "Sister" generates a melancholy and sorrow that are tied to the understanding that one cannot escape sin. The story engages in a reflection on endings—of peoples and of stories—with a hint toward the story's own ending. Finally, drawing on a wider theological and literary context, including the ideas of sin, freedom, and guilt in modern Hebrew literature, this article suggests that "Sister" should be read not as a celebration of forbidden passion but as an exploration of the grief that accompanies the failure to reconcile desire with moral restraint. In that manner, it challenges prevailing secular assumptions about the authenticity of transgression in modern literature.*

When Israeli Nobel Prize winner Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon passed away in 1970, Pinchas Sadeh, a prominent Israeli writer, wrote in his diary:

PROOFTEXTS 41, 2025, 18–39.
 • doi: 10.2979/ptx.00014.

> At noon someone calls and says that Agnon died. I never met him. He had no influence on me, and I have never felt anything while reading his books. Some stories are incredibly beautiful, but overall, their value is negative. The contrast to Brenner, to Berdichevsky and myself. He does not say anything on life, he is far from love, from the universe, from nature, from distress, from the search. Anti-religious. A Jew in the anti-religious, anti-prophetic, anti-biblical sense. I hate his Mishnaic style (2.17.1970).[1]

Sadeh's declaration seems surprising and absurd at the very same time. How can Agnon, perhaps *the* model of modern religious-Jewish literature, be described as antireligious? What does his description of Agnon as antireligious mean, and how does this statement connect to aesthetic judgment? By placing himself in line with the writers of the Hebrew revival—Yosef Ḥayyim Brenner and Micha Josef Berdyczewski—Sadeh reveals the character of the religiosity (*religyoziyut*) and the modernism in which he operates. Religiosity and religion are understood as opposing forces, making it almost impossible to admit the possibility of Jewish literature, which, according to Sadeh's formulation, is inherently unable to address topics such as life, love, and nature. In this article, I will argue that indeed Agnon is not *religyozi*, but in order to explain this, I must first clarify what *religyoziyut* ("religiosity") means, and how it relates to the emergence of the desire to sin.

I will argue that an examination of the uses of this term in Hebrew texts since the revival period—namely, from the end of the nineteenth century—shows that *religyoziyut* is more often used to describe the opposite of religion. Paradoxically, *religyoziyut* is a secular term. I address the concept of "religiosity" as the intersection where religion and aesthetics meet. My main argument is that religiosity incorporates hostility towards halakhah (Jewish law) by shifting religion into the realm of either the private (and universal) or the aesthetic. In addition, religiosity, like Romanticism and nationalism, takes a paradoxical position: it returns to the past yet excludes and delimits parts of it.

One of the leading agents of this process was Martin Buber, who distinguished between religion, understood as an external and institutional expression, and religiosity (*Religiosität*), which is internal, spontaneous, and individual. In his essay "Jewish Religiosity" from 1913, he clarifies what he means regarding the distinction

between these two concepts in relation to Judaism. According to Buber, "the revival of Judaism—in fact, means the revival of Jewish religiosity":

> I say and mean, religiosity (*Religiosität*). I do not say and do not mean religion. Religiosity is man's sense of wonder and adoration, an ever anew becoming [. . .] Religiosity starts anew with every young person, shaken to his very core by the mystery. Religion wants to force him into a system stabilized for all time. Religiosity means activity—the elemental entering into relation with the absolute; religion means passivity—an acceptance of the handed-down command. [. . .] Religion means preservation; religiosity—renewal.[2]

Religiosity is not only a theological matter but is connected in Buber's thought to the search for the living, inner, and original power of the nation. Thus, the fact that a "Jewish religiosity" existed in the past provokes the conclusion that the Jews are indeed a nation. This distinction also gained popularity within Hebrew literature. Thus, for example, Brenner opposes the joyful religiosity of the "man of the field" with the rigorous God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God of the *Shulhan Arukh*, whom Brenner calls the "great Misnagged."[3]

The description of the halakhic God as a rigorous "Misnagged" is part of a quest for a Jewish version of spirituality that corresponds to the literary mindset of the early twentieth century. Thus, it is faith and not halakhah that is praiseworthy, as part of the romanticized admiration of authenticity. As argued by Charles Taylor in *The Ethics of Authenticity*, authenticity as a value began to emerge in the eighteenth century alongside modern ideas of expressivity, personal creativity, and genuineness.[4] In this context, acts of sin and breaking the law received new and special attention, as I will show in what follows.

The identification of authenticity with emotion and the glorification of spontaneity and disobedience are part of the range of emotions bequeathed by Romantic literature. According to Andrew Lynch:

> Post-Romantic readers may tend to think of spontaneity as the core value in their emotional lives, but literary instances from the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* onwards show that the control of emotion and its direction to a

> right end have often been considered the most imporotant things about it, and a central concern in literary aesthetics and ethics.[5]

Lynch demonstrates how in every literary period one can find different emotional expectations. In Sadeh's writing, which was highly influenced by Romantic literature, the search for *religyoziyut* (religiosity) is attached to an enchantment of sin:

> Had they at least sinned (had there been among them one Cain who murdered out of disappointment at God's silence; not to speak of one Abraham, trying to murder at God's command [. . .]; or even one Jacob Frank, trying to pass through the sewers into the City of God) then they would have been of indisputably higher degree; for then, at least, they would have been. Sin would have extracted them from their state of nothingness, and would have placed them, each of them alone (for sin is always personal and never collective), each of them as a single individual before the single God.[6]

As can be seen from this passage, Sadeh ties together sin with being and individuality, while observance is associated with nothingness. Literature cannot emerge from the realm of halakhah, as it requires a transgressive act. This idea is augmented by a fascination with the figure of the heretic, expressed here by the figure of Jacob Frank.

In this article, I would like to read Agnon alongside the concepts of religiosity and desire to sin. Over the years, readers and scholars of Agnon have assumed his status as a religious or "God-fearing" author, as he is called by some. Some have even ventured so far as to label him specifically a "religious Zionist" author, basing their arguments on passages from his works.[7] All want a share of the prize, as this debate is always also about taking possession of a cultural treasure, with all the profit that is attached to its high symbolic capital. In what follows, I will attempt to broaden these debates with additional meaning, locating the discussion within the historical and theological context of the desire to sin and the decline of the sentiment of fear of sin (*yirʾat ḥet*). I will argue that Agnon's story "Aḥot" ("Sister"), minor as it may be, holds at its center the tensions among literature, sin, and the feelings of fear of sin and grief—and therein lies its uniqueness. I will first discuss how the desire to

sin and the figure of the heretic relate to the concept of "love" before turning to a detailed discussion of Agnon's story "Sister."

REPRESSED DESIRES AND THE SIN OF INCEST

Agnon's "Sister" was first published in 1910 in *Hapoʿel hatsaʿir*. Here I will focus on its last version, published in the 1931 edition of *Upon the Handles of the Lock* (*ʿAl kappot hamanʿul*), although the earlier versions will also be brought into consideration. The story is very short, only four pages long, and almost nothing happens in it. The story's protagonist is Naʿaman, a clerk and a poet who is preoccupied with his work and finds it difficult to concentrate. The story depicts Naʿaman as assailed by a vague desire, perhaps the desire that in monastic literature is called the "noonday demon"—a demon particularly favored by Agnon (for example, in his story "Hamalbush" ["The Garment"]). The distracted hero ventures out on a walk, considering whether to go to Adah or to Zillah, two girls with whom he is romantically involved. His feet, however, lead him to the home of his sister. He finds her sitting at home—sad, lonely, and reading novels like his mother. Naʿaman and his sister conduct a vague dialogue, at the end of which Naʿaman kisses his sister—whether his sister herself or only her hand is not completely clear. With this unclear kiss the story concludes. This is the thin plot of the story. Sparse as it is, narratively speaking, it is very dense with allusions, to a degree that is extraordinary even for Agnon, as discussed in fascinating commentary by Chaya Shacham, Tzahi Weiss, and Ziva Shamir.[8]

I began this article with a critique of interpretations that seek to categorize Agnon's religiosity, but interpretations that ignore the text's theological allusions also miss important aspects. Thus, in his essay on *Upon the Handles of the Lock*, Dan Laor argues that

> the encounter with his depressed sister evokes the memory of his mother and engulfs him with guilt for having abandoned his parental home, causing him to be temporarily castrated. The story ends as he bows down to kiss his sister's hand, foregoing the anticipated rendezvous with his lover, which was his original destination.[9]

This interpretation clearly reflects the Freudian concept of a repressed desire for one's sister, which itself represents the repressed desire for the mother and causes

castration and sexual dysfunction. However, this view overlooks the theology of incest and of sin, allusions to both of which can be found in abundance in the story.

Another interpretation, and indeed a more theological one, has been proposed by Weiss, who compares the dead mother to the sister and the sister to the Shekhinah, proposing that the sister is not a real but a heavenly figure. The sins, he argues, are the sexual sins suggested at the beginning of story with Adah and Zillah, whose names, as also shown by Shamir,[10] are those of the wives of Lamech in Genesis 4:19. In his commentary on this verse, Rashi writes about these two women: "Such was the way of the generation of the Flood: one for procreation and one for intercourse." Weiss argues that these sexual sins can theurgically harm the Shekhinah—that is, the sister—and that Agnon is actually describing the sinful atmosphere of Jaffa in the early twentieth century, as a city that is "fertile ground for a life of sin."[11] Shamir, by contrast, proposes that Naʿaman's sin is that of narcissism and self-love.

Although all these interpretations are fascinating and enrich the reading of the story, in all of them the sister symbolizes the death and degradation that are initiated by sexuality, and the real sin is that of sexual lenience that occurs with Adah and Zillah. In Weiss's interpretation, the sister turns into a metaphysical entity symbolizing a heavenly realm; Naʿaman's entry to her bedroom and all their conversations and gestures are understood merely as symbols. In Shamir's analysis as well, the sister represents the place of spirituality, holiness, and sealed-off, celibate life and is opposed to the true life expressed in the pleasures of worldly desires and sexual freedom.

I will propose an opposite interpretation. I will argue that the story does indeed lead to these interpretations, but that this path is a literary device. According to my interpretation, Zillah and Adah are merely attempts to escape Naʿaman's true sin, which lay in his desire for his sister. Indeed, throughout the story, whenever Adah and Zillah are mentioned, they interest Naʿaman only as they bring to mind the sin of incest. Adah appears in the story in the context of her brother, and Zillah is described as follows: "Her full, wild, bare arms that enwrapped his neck like snakes, like the serpents of love that stand guard over a packed treasure chest. Naʿaman contemplated her mysterious inner grace [*ḥesed*], and a pleasant smile played over his delicate face."[12] This description is supposedly one of sin, featuring serpents and lust. However, it contains also another possibility: The words "Naʿaman contemplated her mysterious inner grace [*ḥesed*]" should be read attentively. The word "contemplated"

(*shivvah lenegdo*) refers, of course, to the verse "I keep the Lord always before me" (Psalm 16:8), but what Naʿaman keeps before him is *ḥesed*, a word that means both "grace" and "disgrace," as in Leviticus 20:17: "If a man takes his sister, a daughter of his father or a daughter of his mother, and sees her nakedness, and she sees his nakedness, it is a *disgrace* [*ḥesed*], and they shall be cut off in the sight of their people; he has uncovered his sister's nakedness, he shall be subject to punishment."

I propose that in "Sister" Agnon engages with the kabbalistic view of incest as a supreme theological state; however, far from feelings of enchantment, it brings sorrow and grief. I argue that this is a lament over the theological and erotic potential of sin, as the story ends with the fear and sorrow of sin, not with its celebration. Thus, it is a story about the emotional affect of fearing sin; it portrays the fear of sin as a legitimate feeling, not as an imposed, external value or judgment. In my interpretation, I follow Shacham, who highlights the biblical allusions embedded in the story. According to her, the biblical allusions suggest that the story's focus is sibling relations and love as well as sanctity, taboo, and incest; however, while these allusions seem anecdotal and do not develop into one coherent theme in the story's first version, in the last version they amount to a discourse on repressed love and the torments of sin:

> According to the entirety of the meanings discussed in this chapter, it becomes clear that in its second version the "innocent" anecdotal story has evolved into a different story, whose hero is no longer the same young man who casually flutters throughout life—"today Hannah and tomorrow Peninnah"—but rather a tormented person, repressing an illicit love for his sister, a love that unknowingly casts a shadow over his life.[13]

However, the story's intertexts are not limited to the Bible or kabbalistic ideas (as shown by Weiss) but include Agnon's contemporary literary milieu, and especially the literary attitude toward sin in the literature of the Hebrew revival. Therefore, in what follows I will situate "Sister" within the broader context of the intellectual, literary, and theological desire to sin in the early twentieth century, following previous studies that examined Agnon's intellectual and literary bookshelf.[14] Unfolding the prominent place of desire to sin in this period is necessary for understanding Agnon's ambivalent attitude to sin, literature, and fear.

ENDING STORIES

In "Sister," Naʿaman's sister is described as avoiding finishing the novels that she is reading, in a similar manner to her mother: "and he saw his sister. She was sitting by the window, sitting just as his mother, peace be upon her, would sit [. . .] reading one novel after another (though in all her days, she never read a single novel all the way through)." This description becomes a literary-theoretical discussion between the siblings:

> "Sister," Naʿaman asked in in a whisper. "Have you read the book all the way to the end?"
>
> "No," she said.
>
> "Do read it to the end," he said. "It might give you some pleasure."[15]

The sister, however, does not cooperate with this thematic camouflage, which turns their conversation into a kind of literary discussion unrelated to the true subject of the conversation between them. "She shuddered, turned her eyes away, and said with her eyes what she did not say with her mouth: no one on earth comes to a good end."[16] The sister turns her eyes away, like the beloved in the Song of Songs whom the lover asks to "turn your eyes away from me, for they overwhelm me" (Song of Songs 6:5). However, more important than the romantic allusions appearing throughout the story are the words that she does not quote explicitly: "No one on earth comes to a good end." This statement by the sister echoes a verse from Ecclesiastes 7:20: "Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning." What she seems to mean is that the act that appears like an arbitrary literary choice—refraining from reading novels to the end—is in fact a theological choice, as there is no righteous man whose end is good. In other words, all things (including books) end in sin. We could perhaps complete the sister's statement for her: "All things end in sin; I therefore avoid endings."

This statement is like a death sentence for the speaker, and here as well, Agnon chooses a theological turn of phrase: "Naʿaman heard what he heard and closed his eyes from the weight of what he heard."[17] What he hears—using the Hebrew word *shemuʿah* for the oral teaching conveyed by his sister—causes him to shut his eyes in sorrow. That is, the story generates melancholy and sorrow related to the understanding that sin is unavoidable.

The end of the story therefore presents a discussion of how stories end in general, but it also hints at the end of the story of the protagonist himself. How, then, does the story "Sister" end?

> Suddenly, his eyes gave birth to tears, and a love such as he had never before known shone on those tears. Naʿaman took his sister's hand and lifted it up toward his mouth, and then suddenly bent down and put his mouth on it and kissed it with a lingering kiss.[18]

What happens in this ending? It is intentionally vague (in Hebrew more so than in English, since the word "hand" is feminine in Hebrew) but establishes a clear basis for an interpretation according to which the hero gives his sister a kiss that is not appropriate for siblings, one that is not just on her hand. Contrary to the original plan to kiss her hand, something occurs "suddenly." There is an emotion of love or desire that bursts out and transcends the great sorrow, moving him (not) to perform a forbidden act.

Beyond the theoretical literary discussion of the ending of "Sister," the endings of two other stories resonate between its lines. The first is the end of the biblical story of Amnon and Tamar, a story that ends with a change of heart: "Then Amnon was seized with a very great loathing for her; indeed, his loathing was even greater than the lust he had felt for her" (2 Samuel 13:15). This story is alluded to by way of the word *haḥedraḥ*: "Naʿaman opened the door gently and entered the room (*haḥedraḥ*)." In the biblical story, the realization of desire through the sexual act leads to great contempt, yet "Sister" expresses a complete reversal: the sister teaches her brother to avoid endings. Here the brother listens to her words and closes his eyes. At this moment, his eyes are suddenly filled with tears, and he is struck with "a love such as he had never before known."[19]

The ending of "Sister" resonates with another biblical ending when the sister asks "Have you read the book all the way to the end?" and repeats the phrase "to the end."[20] This phrase is taken from the Ahijah's prophecy of the disaster that will come to the house of Jeroboam: "and [I] will consume the house of Jeroboam, just as one burns up dung until it is all gone (*ʿad tummo*) (1 Kings 14:10). The end of sinners is to be burned until they are completely consumed, and this is the end of which the sister warns.

Thus, the conversation between the two siblings is a theoretical and a narratological literary discussion: What do story endings look like? At the same time, it is

also theological: Is sin a formal literary question? Does literacy require sin? In order to examine what I understand as the story's answers to these questions, I will turn to a theoretical and historical discussion of the passion for sin in literature in general, and particularly at the turn of the twentieth century.

LOVE, TRANSGRESSION, AND THE FIGURE OF THE HERETIC

In *At the Handles of the Lock*, the story "Sister" appears next to very important novellas such as *Bidmi yameha* (*In the Prime of Her Life*) and *Sippur pashut* (*A Simple Story*), as well as such virtuosic stories as "Panim aḥerot" ("Another Face") and "Harofe ugerushato" ("The Doctor's Divorcée"). What is the role of "Sister" within this broader collection?

As is well known, the title of the collection, *At the Handles of the Lock*, refers to Song of Songs 5:5: "I got up to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, on the handle of the lock." The subtitle of the collection is *Sippurei ahavim* (*Love Stories*), yet Sadeh claimed in the quote at the beginning of this article that Agnon "is far from love." What is the meaning of this statement? I would like to argue that the way in which Sadeh understands love and desire—as founded inherently on sin—is different from the love that Agnon seeks to address. The comparison with Sadeh, who explicitly links himself to early twentieth-century literature, enables us to understand Agnon's concept of love in this literary and intellectual context. By focusing on "Sister," I claim that Agnon seeks to say something fundamental about love. He also examines narratively the meaning of the epithet "sister," which is used for the beloved in Song of Songs: "my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one" (Song of Songs 5:2). Agnon turns the metaphorical epithet into reality and examines what occurs when the beloved is the real sister.

Since love is the fundamental myth of Western literature, writing about it is an attempt to suggest a Jewish version of love literature. However, as we learn from the literary tradition, the myth of love is most often that of forbidden love, born out of sin. In the well-known classic Tristan and Isolde, the two lovers could have married each other, but the mechanism of the story—which is manifested in their shared drinking of the love potion—binds love with sin in a kind of curse that cannot be broken. The narrator's literary stratagem seems too easy and, narratively

speaking, unnecessary. It seems that the narrator's decision to choose such an easy solution of drinking a love potion reflects the way in which love is sentenced to be associated with prohibition and later, consequently, with death. Read in this context, "Sister" functions as a key story for understanding love, particularly its connection to sin.

It should be remembered that the concept of sin has its own history, as argued by Gary Anderson in *Sin: A History*. Sin repeatedly undergoes metamorphoses in terms of its metaphorical representation and function in the social and theological spheres; sin's metaphorical representation indicates various social and theological concepts and how sin functions in a specific historical context.[21] The desire to sin, however, requires its own history because it differs from sin itself, which may be inevitable but is not desired.

As can be seen from Sadeh's reaction to Agnon's death, religiosity (*religyoziyut*) is seen in the realm of modern Hebrew literature as universal and belonging to the aesthetic sphere, which is why in literature and literary criticism (as already apparent in Brenner's writings) a positive attitude toward religion is frequently infused with religiosity and hostility to Jewish law. Hebrew literature as an aesthetic space adopted these views of Judaism, so in order to be born into the universal literary space, one had to break Jewish law.[22]

This breaking of Jewish law is closely connected to questions of authenticity. I argue that, as authenticity ascended in modern Hebrew literature, the theology of sin and the desire to sin became central, with sin coming to be understood as the moment of discovering one's innermost truth. In the works of early Hebrew authors such as M. Z. Feierberg, as well as in later authors like Sadeh and Yona Wallach, the connection between authenticity, sin, and violation of the law grows ever stronger. At the same time, the sentiment of fear of sin comes increasingly to be seen as the opposite emotion, one that is patently inauthentic, dictated from above, and external to the subject.[23]

This argument continues the discussion conducted by Saba Mahmood in the context of religious-Muslim feminism, where she demonstrates how obedience is perceived as a lack of agency, as well as how the values of freedom and desire are central for the construction of the modern subject.[24] Mahmood's argument contributes not only to current perceptions of religious feminism but also to the understanding of the secular subject more broadly, and of obedience as a historically contextualized and

culture-dependent value. I wish to add another aspect to her argument, regarding the construction of the fear of sin in the early stages of secularization as "non-emotion."

In the early twentieth century, the sanctification of sin granted theological meaning to the secularizing historical process. In the context of this discussion, Christof Schmidt has described how Gershom Scholem gains insight into the nature of Jewish liberalism in Germany as he observes his father reciting the blessing "Who creates the fruit of the tobacco" when smoking on the Sabbath. This situation, which is both amusing and expresses the contradictions of the *Zeitgeist*, continues the famous Sabbatean blessing "matir asurim" ("permitting the forbidden") and enables Scholem's Sabbatean commentary. This is not a case of self-abnegation of bourgeois, rationalist Jews but an image that invites interpretation, since at its basis is the gap between interiority and exteriority. Outside, Jews blend into general society, but Jewish life continues to stir inside: "In this way, Scholem sought to preserve Jewish 'life' from rationalist destruction—by redirecting the process of liberal emancipation towards the Frankist heresy."[25] In other words, what is at stake here is the historical figure of the heretic, who enables the duplicity of inside and outside: "The heretic permits translating the Jewish liberal situation in Germany into a theological scenario that did not place the possibility of a secular politics at risk."[26] The structure of secularization can thus be said to be compatible with "Sabbatean aesthetics."

The engagement with transgression is an attempt to indicate not the Sabbateanism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century but the *reception of Sabbateanism* as part of the desire for the transgressive. Sabbateanism—no matter how truly transgressive it was historically—acted as another myth to which one could return as a textual and symbolic resource.[27] Original Sabbateanism is perhaps not part of the sources of secularization, but Sabbateanism in its renewed meaning did become such a source and is the backdrop of my argument here.

The figure of the heretic requires a separate discussion, yet for our purposes here it is crucial to understand how, while transgression and taboo were associated with expressions of life in the early twentieth century, in "Sister" sin is tied to sorrow. For example, in the play *Shabbetai Ẓevi* by Nathan Bistritzky (1931), the messianic and national awakening is symbolized by the annulment of Tishʿah b'Av, the day of destruction, which is supposed to be annulled when the moment of redemption

arrives.[28] This moment of Sabbatean redemption is described (beautifully) mostly as an awakening of desire, a "time of love":

> Nathan of Gaza: (In a rage) The people have reached a degree of heat that can't be imagined . . . Knesset (Community) of Israel, the time of love has come . . . the entire world spreads a wedding canopy above it . . . and where is the beloved? Where is the Redeemer of Israel? We have no time, no time! . . . Each soul cries for Redemption, like a suckling infant cries for its mother's milk, just so . . . Jews are leaving their land, abandoning their home and possessions, throwing it all away behind their backs, for here, the End of Wonders has arrived . . . the End of Wonders has arrived . . .[29]

The urgency is expressed not least through the rising temperature of the text ("a degree of heat that cannot be imagined"); its punctuation, including the many ellipses, which, although relatively characteristic of Hebrew literature in this period, are here particularly frequent; and the semantic field of the Song of Songs (the beloved, the canopy) and of suckling and thirst.[30] The connection between sin and Zionism thus participates in formulating a language of desire. It is part of the national revival, the attempt to find and awaken the powers of the inner life.

The figure of the heretic was also central in the philosophy of life, which profoundly influenced the literature of the revival period.[31] In Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Oedipus, the tragic hero, attains wisdom and is able to solve riddles only through the most grievous violation of the taboo—specifically the incest taboo:

> There is an ancient popular belief, particularly in Persia, that a wise magician can only be born out of incest; the riddle-solving Oedipus who woos his mother immediately leads us to interpret this as meaning that some enormous offence against nature (such as incest in this case) . . . [has occurred]. How else could nature be forced to reveal its secrets, other than by victorious resistance to her.[32]

Prometheus, too—that titanic figure—attained wisdom (fire) through theft, breaking the law and fighting the gods themselves:

> Thus the very first philosophical problem presents a painful, irresolvable conflict between god and man, and pushes it like a mighty block of rock up against the threshold of every culture. Humanity achieves the best and highest of which it is capable by committing an offence . . . a bitter thought, but one which, thanks to the dignity it accords the offence, contrasts strangely with the Semitic myth of the Fall, where the origin of evil was seen to lie in curiosity, mendacious pretense, openness to seduction, lasciviousness, in short: in a whole series of predominantly feminine attributes. What distinguishes the Aryan conception is the sublime view that active sin is the true Promethean virtue.[33]

These Nietzschean ideas abound in images that shaped the *Zeitgeist*, including the definition of the Semitic original sin as feminine, compared to the active (masculine) sin of he who "aspires to the heavens."

Nietzsche, of course, was not a marginal thinker, and his works enjoyed the status of Scripture for the youth of the period, whether in a profound manner or superficially, in the form of slogans and aphorisms.[34] This spirit becomes increasingly prominent in turn-of-the-century literature. Thus, the protagonist of *Mysteries* (1892) by Norwegian Romantic author Knut Hamsun expresses the relationship between sin and the exceptional: "Well, show us a single real exception; see if you can find one! . . . None of your ridiculous commonplace transgressions; no, a rare and terrifying debauch, a refinement of profligacy, a royal sin, full of hell's raw splendor.[35]

This fascination with breaking taboos pervaded modern Hebrew literature. In Berdyczewski's novella *From a Place of Thunder* (1921), in contrast to "Sister," the incestuous relationship comes to fruition. At the center of the story is the relationship of Solomon the Red, the main protagonist of the story, with his son's wife. Although their sexual relations finally end in fracture and remorse, it seems that the sin and passion are fundamental to the development of the mythical and creative hero in Berdyczewski's work. Nurit Govrin explains how important the appearance of these forces is for Hebrew revival literature as part of her attempt to explain how

Berdyczewski's work served as an example to the Second Aliyah, although he himself was not completely part of the Zionist movement:

> In the present, under the circumstances of the Jewish shtetl, these latent powers have no chance of emerging. They are hidden in the depth of the soul, and if they burst out, they are distorted and falsified. But what is important is the mere fact of their existence, for once the circumstances have been changed, these forces will be able to emerge and be realized in a positive and constructive manner. This is why we find in these stories an abundance of sinners and sins, theft, covetousness, adultery and even incest, since such acts testify to the existence of sinners and people driven by impulse, but also to the vitality of the sinner. This constitutes a ground for hoping that the nation is not yet dead and that the individuals within it have still retained their power.[36]

Sin, therefore, expresses vitality, and Solomon the Red, as a mythical and desirous figure, both describes and enables the development of a new type of Jew: the desiring Jew. Indeed, incest is not simply another type of transgression but carries with it the literary and intellectual context of the early twentieth century, as well as the Sabbatean theological tradition. This theological importance of incest can be seen, for example, in this famous passage from Nathan of Gaza's work *In the Footsteps of Messiah* (*Beʿiqvot mashiaḥ*):

> And as long as there are prohibited sexual relationships (*isurei ʿarayot*) below, we cannot make a union (*yiḥud*) above between a brother and a sister, and a son and a daughter, until the nakedness (*ʿervah*) of below disappears. And then he shall be similar to his creator, and the secret of the tree of life, which is emanation (*ʾatsilut*), will be present in this world without any separation.[37]

The story "Sister" echoes the assumed theological potential of incest, yet, as opposed to the Sabbatean ethos, here the two siblings consciously avoid the sexual act and the realization of their passion.[38] My main argument, therefore, is that "Sister" is misleading, as it is mainly a story about non-sinning, about non-incest. This shift from

desire to sorrow can be summed up in a sentence that the narrator says: "He does not fear the misery because it is better than the longing."[39] The protagonist seems to prefer the death attached to the figure of the sister over the "life" to be uncovered in sin.

THE CONCEPT OF FREEDOM

As I mentioned earlier, to a large extent the story leads the reader to view the hero as one who is seeking to extricate himself from the Oedipal complex, as argued by Laor. The ending might also be seen as a reinforcement of the Oedipal complex insofar as the sister is a stand-in for the missing mother. Weiss stresses the portrayal of Jaffa as a place of sin and argues that the protagonist chooses his sister in order to escape this sinful environment. This reading rests on the beginning of the story, where the narrator misleads the readers by leaving the impression that the story is about a hedonistic and unburdened bachelor, lacking commitments, who enjoys the freedom of being in distant from his family:

> It has been two years since he left his parents' home. His heart longed like a child's for his family. At the same time, he was glad to be away from them, a free man, unburdened by family. He can do whatever he likes (*kekhol hayashar beʿeinav yaʿaseh*). "One day Hannah, Peninnah the next."[40]

As the story progresses, however, it becomes clear that these were empty words, and that the hero is not free at all—not because he is burdened by a family and cannot lead a licentious lifestyle as he pleases, but quite the contrary: because he is not free of the desire for the sin of incest with his mother/sister.

Of course, the concept of freedom is laden with additional meanings. Secular Jews were called "free" (*ḥofshiyim*) perhaps on the basis of a teaching from b. Niddah, which famously states: "Once a person dies, he becomes free from the mitzvot" (b. Niddah 61b). Comparing the different versions of the story reveals that Agnon hesitated between the words *ḥofshi* and *ben ḥorin*, which he used in the 1910 version. The term *ben ḥorin* also echoes a famous rabbinic tradition that interprets the word "etched"—*ḥarut*—in the context of the giving of the commandments, as freedom—*ḥerut*—which is realized through keeping God's command.[41] The later version,

which corresponds to the historical connotation of the concept of freedom, leads to Weiss's interpretation: Naʿaman is happy to be "free"—that is, secular—and thus free to do as he pleases in the sexual sense. However, this reading quickly collapses in light of Naʿaman's lack of desire for Adah and Zillah, who seem to pale in comparison to the desire for the sister. The gap between these declarations regarding Naʿaman's complete freedom and the strong feelings of repressed desire directed toward the sister renders the narrator unreliable.

The reading I wish to propose emphasizes the melancholy of sin, a feeling that is deliberately opposed to the literary myth regarding the joy of sin, as formulated by Nietzsche. "Sister" expresses not a celebration of sin or union with the sister, neither in heaven nor on earth, but an almost unavoidable feeling of sorrow and grief. Agnon does not challenge the assumption that sin expresses the moment of birth of modern literature in general and of modern Hebrew literature in particular; in fact, as I have argued, the story further connects literature to sin through the image of reading books. Yet, Agnon seems to draw attention not only to the birth of the story but also to its ending—the ending of the story, and of sin, and to the fear of sin and sorrow that follow.

This sorrow recalls the idea of the black garments to be worn by the sinner according to rabbinic teaching:

> Rabbi Ilai the Elder says: If a person sees that his [evil] inclination is overcoming him, he should go to a place where he is not known, and wear black clothes, and he should cover himself in simple black garments, and he should do as his heart desires, but he should not desecrate the name of Heaven in public" (b. Qiddushin 40a).

It is customary to quote this passage from b. Qiddushin in the context of the place of sin within the social sphere and the division between public and private sins; I would like, however, to emphasize the element of grieving, expressed in the black garments it merits. In a similar manner, more than a metaphor for the heavenly Shekhinah or an expression of secular permissiveness, as others have suggested, "Sister" is a short yet unique description of and inquiry into the grief of sin. This sentiment, as I have argued throughout this article, stands in contradiction to the widespread attitude toward sin in early modern Hebrew literature, where it is

portrayed as the moment of birth, both of the subject and of literature. The sorrow of sin challenges the prevalent figure of the heretic that developed at the turn of the century and was closely associated with the Jewish national revival.

I will conclude with a broader argument regarding the place of the fear of sin in Hebrew literature. In his essay "Hashirah haʿIvrit vehayetser haraʿ" ("Hebrew Poetry and the Evil Inclination"), Ariel Hirschfeld writes that "beyond the fact that it is an utter political and educational mistake on the part of the ultra-Orthodox to leave the evil inclination entirely in the hands of the 'secular' and thereby grant them an irresistible power of temptation, this position is an utter lie."[42] I would like to use Hirschfeld's words and argue that it is a literary mistake to leave the emotion of fear of sin and the feeling of penance outside the bounds of Hebrew literature. Fear, like the evil inclination, is a real, passionate sentiment that is worthy of narration and interpretation. In other words, not only is sin internal, spontaneous, and authentic; fear, guilt, and regret are real phenomena and not just the lip service of God-fearing authors that accompany sin, as is often claimed. This, I believe, is what Agnon is trying to do in "Sister," through the portrayal of fear and grief as the place where this story, and literature more broadly, ends.

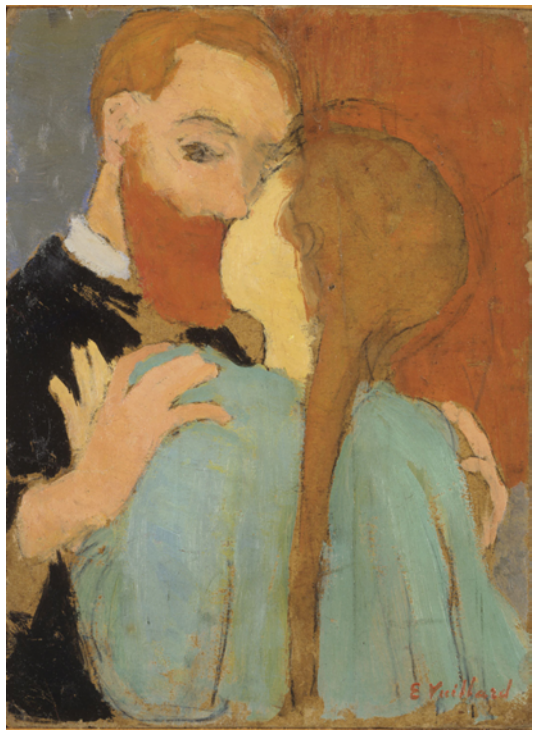
In debates over Agnon's work, the question often arises as to how he should be best defined. Was he primary "religious" or an "artist"? "Traditional" or "modern"? Is he an "innocent author," as A. M. Lifshitz has presented him?[43] Or is there a "tumultuous modernity" hidden beneath his innocent appearance, as argued by Baruch Kurzweil?[44] Does *The Bridal Canopy* follow the tradition of "pietistic literature," or is it a parody of that genre, as Esther Fuchs has claimed?[45]

This ongoing debate, interesting and important as it is, addresses these categories as if they were opposites that exclude each other. In doing so, the predefined and problematic categories of "religious" and "secular," "modern" and "traditional" are reconstituted. However, in this article I have argued that these oppositions are possible only if fear is constructed as non-emotion and inauthentic. Both sides of the debate—those adhering to the notion of the "religious Agnon" and those who claim the opposite—tend to produce the same concept of fear as non-emotion. I argue that Agnon places the feeling of fear as part of the range of emotions he writes about—an emotion that, like any other, is sometimes ridiculous or exaggerated and at other times profound and touching. Describing fear as a legitimate emotion criticizes the way in

which it was formulated, within the framework of secularism, as an inauthentic and uncreative state of obedience and discipline.[46] In this sense, it is an anthropological critique—namely, a critique of the way in which the secularized person is perceived.

"Sister" presents an *image* of a specific emotion, and its importance is less in its plot than in the emotional effect that it seeks to produce. Literature is a central site not only for teaching *how* to feel, but also for debates on *what* emotions are, what feelings are legitimate and suitable for a particular moment.[47] In order to understand the emotional world of the fear of sin and the desire to sin, I have traced one literary moment where one protagonist (almost) sins. What does he feel in those moments? With what colors is the sister's room painted? "Sister" portrays an emotional image of darkness, sadness and grief, an image depicting the mourning for sin, and for a misplaced passion.

I use the word "image" intentionally. While working on this story, I came across the painting "Self-Portrait with Sister" (Edouard Vuillard, ca. 1892) in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This is an odd painting, which depicts the impossible scene of one's love for his sister. As in Agnon's story, this painting presents a hint



of erotic contact, and if it were not for the painting's title, it would have been easy to assume that it depicts two lovers. While looking at it, I realized that in order to understand "Sister," one must first recognize that this story seeks to create in its readers a sense of discomfort. This is done primarily by creating a very actual and visual portrait of the protagonist and his sister. A certain kiss is offered, but its exact manner is obscured. While previous scholarship tended to give the story metaphorical interpretations that repressed this sense of discomfort, here I emphasize the portrait's darker sides and point toward its perversion. There is perversion, but from its very beginning the story is also full of remorse and grief—grief over the sinful end of misplaced desire, the final ending of the story, and perhaps over literature itself.

NOTES

1 Pinhas Sadeh, *Hayomanim* (Or Yehudah, 2013), 131.

2 Martin Buber, "Jewish Religiosity," in *On Judaism*, trans. Eva Jospe; ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (Schocken, 1972), 80–81.

3 Yosef Ḥayyim Brenner, "Haʿarakhat ʿatsmeinu bishloshet hakerakhim," *Revivim* 5 (1914): 85.

4 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1992), 25.

5 Andrew Lynch, "The History of Emotions and Literature," in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Emotion*, ed. Patrick Colm Hogan, Bradley J. Irish, and Lalita Pandit Hogan (Routledge, 2022), 101.

6 Pinhas Sadeh, *Life as a Parable*, trans. Richard Flantz (Carta, 1989), 338.

7 See, e.g., Mordechai Marmorstein, "Tsiyonuto hadatit shel ʿAgnon," *Maqor rishon* (March 15, 2021), https://www.makorrishon.co.il/culture/323471/. For a review of the different trends in the study of Agnon, see Avinoʿam Barshai, introduction to *S. Y. Agnon babiqqoret haʿIvrit*, 2 vols. (Schocken, 1991), 1:1–92.

8 See, respectively, Chaya Shacham, "Hamarbeh betserufim yeduʿim," *Dappim: Research in Literature* 2 (1985): 207–22; Tzaḥi Weiss, *Mot hashekhinah biyetsirat ʿAgnon* (Bar-Ilan University Press, 2009), 103; and Ziva Shamir, "Veheyi li em veʾaḥot," *Ziva Shamir*, https://www.zivashamir.com/post/והיי-לי-אם-ואחות.

9 Dan Laor, "Yesh bekhol zoʾt ahavot semeḥot," *Haaretz* (March 8, 2022), https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/2022-08-03/.

10 Shamir, "Veheyi li em veʾaḥot."

11 Weiss, *Mot*, 103.

12 All translations of "Sister" are by Raymond Scheindlin in this issue pages 13–17. See p. 14.

13 Shacham, "Hamarbeh betserufim yeduʿim," 220.

14 Ziva Shamir, *Beʿiqvei haʾav* (Safra, 2020), 22–23. Yair Mazor, "Haqol haʿAgnoni vehazaʿam haSkandinavi," *Moznayim* 8–9 (1987): 59–64 has pointed to the connections between Agnon and Knut Hamsun, whom I will address below.

15 Scheindlin, Sister, 16.

16 *ibid*., 17.

17 *ibid*.

18 *ibid*.

19 *ibid*.

20 *ibid*.

21 Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (Yale University Press, 2009).

22 I elaborate this idea in the introduction to Tafat Hacohen-Bick, "'I Want a River/ No Small Temple': Theology and Poetics in the Poetry of Pinchas Sadeh, Yona Wallach, and Zelda Schneerson" (Ph.D. diss., Ben Gurion University of the Negev, 2020). See also Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "Secularism, the Christian Ambivalence towards the Jews, and the Notion of Exile," in *Secularism in Question: Jews and Judaism in Modern Times*, ed. Ari Joskowicz and Ethan B. Katz (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 276–98.

23 I intend to elaborate in a separate place on the work of Feierberg. On Sadeh and Wallach, see my discussion in Hacohen-Bick, "I Want a River."

24 Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 202–36.

25 Christof Schmidt, "Hateologia hapolitit shel Gershom Scholem," *Theory and Criticism* 6 (1995): 156.

26 Schmidt, "Hateʿologiyah hapolitit," 153.

27 Maoz Kahana, "Shabbetai Tsvi, ish hahalakhah," *Tsiyyon* 81: 3–4 (2016): 41 demonstrates the significant halakhic basis of Shabbetai Ẓevi's actions and instructions, even those that break the law. These are "gestures of law in which the

utopian, singular moment they seek to produce relies precisely on the ongoing, eternal power of the Law."

28 On turning Tishah b'Av into a day of joy, see Zechariah 8:19 and Maimonides, *Laws of Taʾanit (Fasts)*, 5, 19.

29 Nathan Bistritzky-Agmon, *Ḥezyonot*, vol. 2 (Hadefus Heḥadash, 1960), 503.

30 Mordecai Ze'ev Feierberg's *Whither* (Toby Press, 2004) is also a text abounding in ellipses, but the English translator chose to omit them and replace them with other marks.

31 Yotam Hotam, *Modern Gnosis and Zionism*: *The Crisis of Culture, Life Philosophy and Jewish National Thought* (Routledge, 2013), 3–4.

32 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 47–48.

33 Nietzsche, *Birth*, 49–50.

34 Michal Dekel, *Oedipus beKishinov. Tsiyonut, sifrut, tragediyah* (Bialik, 2014), 58.

35 Knut Hamsun, *Mysteries*, trans. Arthur G. Chater (Knopf, 1922), 68.

36 Nurit Govrin, *Alienation and Regeneration* (MOD, 1989), 47.

37 Gershom Scholem *Beʿiqvot mashiaḥ*, ed. Jonathan Meir (Belimah, 2022), 104.

38 On the theological potential of incest, see Weiss, *Mot*, 104.

39 Scheindlin, Sister, 16.

40 "And it says, 'And the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tablets' (Exodus 32:16). Read not *ḥarut* ('graven') but *ḥerut* ('freedom'). For there is no free man but one that occupies himself with the study of the Torah" (m. Avot 6:2).

41 Ariel Hirschfeld, "Hashirah haʿIvrit vehayetser haraʿ," *Haaretz* (June 02, 2004), https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/2004-06-02/.

42 Barshai, introduction, 8–9.

43 Baruch Kurzweil, *Masotʿal sippurei Shaiʿ Agnon* (Schocken, 1963), 6.

44 Esther Fuchs, *Seḥoq samui. Hebetim qomiʾim bayetsirah haʿAgnonit* (Reshafim, 1987), 15–32.

45 This discussion is relevant not only to the work of Agnon, but also to modern Hebrew literature more broadly, since the introduction of fear as a legitimate literary emotion has the potential to open new interpretive possibilities. In a future study, I wish to examine the place of fear in the writing of Feierberg.

46 Lynch, "History," 101.