Toward a Sisterhood of the Pen: Sister Stories by Agnon and Baron

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Toward a Sisterhood of the Pen
Sister Stories by Agnon and Baron

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This article is about the transformation of the term "aḥot" ("sister") from a familial/erotic or national allegorical connotation to one of female intellectual and literary agency and solidarity. Part of a broader comparative exploration of the fiction of Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon (1887–1970) and Devorah Baron (1887–1956)—literary siblings of a sort who edited and responded to each other's work—this article examines the representation of (literary) sisters in two stories entitled "Aḥot," one by Agnon, which was originally published in Hapoʿel hatsaʿir *and later, in a revised version, in* ʿAl kappot hamanʿul, *and the other by Baron, which was published in the Zionist weekly* Haʿolam *but omitted from her later story collections. Although they were published within months of each other in 1910 and share several common themes and elements, as well as authorial circumstances, these identically titled stories offer markedly divergent and distinctly gendered psychological portraits of the Hebrew literary sister. In Baron's "Aḥot," the older sister serves as narrator and shaper of the story—in other words, as a "sister of the pen." By contrast, Agnon's story leaves the sister largely silent and inert, seemingly incapable of reading, let alone writing a story to its conclusion. Notably, Agnon and Baron each return to and revise their sister portraits in later works of fiction. Agnon writes* Bidmi yameha, *which comes to replace "Aḥot" as the opening story of* ʿAl kappot hamanʿul *in later editions and famously features a female narrator/writer. Baron pens two stories, "Hayom harishon" and "Bereshit," featured in her first collection,* Sippurim, *which rewrites the idea of the sister as if from the very beginning.*

In June 2021, I received rabbinic ordination from Yeshivat Maharat, one of the first Orthodox institutions to ordain women as rabbis. At the ordination ceremony, I participated in an innovative ritual created by Maharat that grounds the

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innovation of women's ordination in the only liturgical invocation of sisterhood in the Hebrew Bible. One of the rabbinic faculty members calls out the name of each student, as one might see at any graduation, but follows this with the words *aḥoteinu at hayi leʾalfei revavah* ("Our sister, may you become thousands of myriads, Genesis 25:60"), at which point the student receives her certificate and walks under a banner emblazoned with this verse, as shown in figure 1.

The verse that Maharat chose for this ritual comes from that long biblical chapter where the servant of Abraham travels to Haran to find a spouse for his master's son, Isaac. Rebecca's brother Laban and unnamed mother have just received bountiful gifts from Abraham's servant and have asked Rebecca whether she would like

Figure 1: The author walking under the banner for her ordination, June 2021.

to tarry at home for a while or leave straight away to marry their kinsman Isaac, to which Rebecca simply responds, *elekh*, "I shall go." Rebecca's mother and brother then offer the following blessing for procreation and clan dominance: *vayevarkhu et Rivqah vayoʾmru lah aḥoteinu at hayi leʾalfei revavah veyirash zarʿekh et shaʿar sonʾav* ("And they blessed Rebecca and said to her: 'Our sister, may you become thousands of myriads. May your seed take hold of the gate of its haters'").[1]

According to Amy Kalmanofsky, this blessing supports the typology of the "Ideal Sister in the Bible," one who "directs her independent will and desire in service to her natal [patriarchal] household."[2] In the contemporary, feminist context of the Maharat ritual, however, this verse constitutes a countertraditional prayer for the reproduction of female knowledge and leadership. The fact that Maharat has made it a goal not just to increase the ranks of ordained women rabbis but also to disseminate their writings renders this verse a clarion call for a sisterhood of the pen.[3] The nexus here of mother, brother, and sister in the verse—the patriarch being conspicuously absent from the scene—is especially suggestive and will recur throughout the following comparison of sister portraits in several stories by Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon (1887–1970) and Devorah Baron (1887–1956), beginning with two stories that were published within months of each other in 1910, each titled "Aḥot" ("Sister").

BIBLICAL AND POSTBIBLICAL SISTERS

This article is part of a broader paired exploration of stories by Agnon and Baron, literary siblings of a sort who edited and responded to each other's work over the course of their careers.[4] It tracks the transformation in their fiction of the term "aḥot" ("sister") from a national/allegorical or familial/erotic connotation to a figure of female intellectual and literary solidarity—an "Aḥot laʿet" ("sister of the pen"). Given the density of biblical references in the various stories considered in this article, it is worth noting at the outset the relative paucity of sister stories in the Bible. According to Frederick E. Greenspahn, in his study of brotherly rivalries in the Bible, sister stories in the Bible appear at best as pale, underdeveloped versions of the more dominant brother-centered narratives.[5] In *Brothers and Sisters: Myth and Reality*, Henry Abramovitch offers a similar argument, noting that while the book of "Genesis does contain two sister stories that are among the most moving of all sibling tales . . . these

stories revolve around the essentially feminine topics of love and fertility."[6] The procreative "naming war" that unfolds between Rachel and Leah in Genesis 30 underscores this dynamic, in which sister stories chiefly serve the function of expanding the patriarchal clan. When Miriam diverges from this procreative purpose in Numbers 12 and attempts to become a sister of the prophetic word, she becomes dangerous and dispensable; as a result, she alone is punished with *tsaraʿat* and cast out of the camp. That Aaron, her would-be fraternal collaborator protests her condition using the imagery of a stillbirth—"Let her not be, pray, like one dead, who when he comes out of his mother's womb, half his flesh is eaten away" (Numbers 12:13)—points to what ought to be her proper purpose as a woman/mother/sister: the maternal birthing of healthy babies, preferably sons, not stillborn prophecies or texts.

Elsewhere in the Bible, the word "aḥot" appears in the context of relations that blur the familial and the erotic. Leviticus 20:19 and 18:12–13 explicitly prohibit incestuous sexual relations with one's sister as well as the sister of one's father and mother (one's aunt), a prohibition directly flouted in the infamous story of Amnon's rape of his sister Tamar (2 Samuel 13). In that story, Amnon's use of the intimate term "aḥoti" is rendered grotesque by his abuse of familial access, with Amnon feigning illness in order to lure his sister into his room and overcome her sexually. Tamar's other brother, Absalom, thereafter uses the same intimate form of address ("aḥoti") to quiet Tamar's complaints, heaping onto this story of sororal abuse the additional insult of silencing those women who would protest their fate.

In contrast to these sinful associations, Song of Songs imagines the ideal female romantic partner as "aḥoti khallah," as a sister-bride. As Abramovitch again notes,

> as a cultural fantasy, a profound sense of intimacy comes from combining origin and eros in the body of a single, familiar person. Mythology from all over the world describes enduring examples of sister-brother marriages. . . . The biblical Song of Songs gives poetic expression to this unique intimacy when the "sister" says: "Ah, why are you not my brother, nursed at my mother's breast!" (Song 8:1) and her "brother" replies, "My sister, my promised bride, you ravish my heart" (Song 4:9). These poignant poems express symbolic yearning for an "inner marriage" with the ideal sibling.[7]

Building on the traditional allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs as a yet unconsummated love story between a masculine God (as represented by the male speaker in the Song) and Israel (as represented by the sister-bride Shulamite), several postbiblical poems figure the exiled people of Israel as a doleful, exiled, albeit beloved little sister.[8] For example, a thirteenth-century Spanish *piyyut* by Abraham Hazan Girondi entitled "Aḥot qetanah" ("Little Sister") begins with the picture of an exiled, ailing little sister praying before God, although it is not the sister who speaks in the poem; rather, the (brother) poet prays on her behalf, as Moses does for his silenced and banished sister Miriam in Numbers 12:13:

אָחוֹת קְטַנָּה/תְּפִלּוֹתֶיהָ	Little Sister/her prayers
עוֹרֶכָה, וְעוֹנָה/תְּהִלּוֹתֶיהָ.	She arranges, and refrains/her praises
אֵל, נָא רְפָא נָא/לְמַחֲלוֹתֶיהָ—	God, please heal/her illnesses
תְּכַלֶּה שָׁנָה וְקִלָּלוֹתֶיהָ.	End the year and its curses.
[. . .]	[. . .]
עַד מָה תַּעְלִים/עֵינְךָ—וְתִרְאֶה	How long will your eyes/ignore—Look
זָרִים אוֹכְלִים/נַחֲלוֹתֶיהָ?	Strangers are consuming/her portion
תְּכַלֶּה שָׁנָה וְקִלָּלוֹתֶיהָ.	End the years and its curses.[9]

The literary image of the sister as a beloved but downtrodden Jewish people in exile persists well into the modern period, most notably in a famous poem by Hebrew Enlightenment poet Yehudah Leib Gordon (1830–92) entitled "Aḥoti ruḥamah" ("My Pitiful Sister"), a poetic response to the wave of pogroms in Russia in 1881–82.[10]

(לכבוד בת יעקב אשר עִנָּה בן חמור)	(Dedicated to the daughter of Jacob whom the son of Hamor raped)
מַה-תִּתְיַפְּחִי, אֲחוֹתִי רַחֲמָה,	Why sob, my pitiful sister,
מַה-נָּפַל לִבֵּךְ, מָה רוּחֵךְ נִפְעָמָה,	How your heart has fallen, your beating heart
וּלְחָיַיִךְ שׁוֹשָׁנִים מַה-נָּבְלוּ?	And your rosy cheeks, how have they withered?
כִּי בָּאוּ שׁוֹדְדִים וּכְבוֹדֵךְ חִלָּלוּ?	Because robbers have come and raided your honor?
אִם גָּבַר הָאֶגְרוֹף, יַד זֵדִים רָמָה,	If the fist has won, a malicious hand has been raised
הֲבָךְ הָעָוֹן, אֲחוֹתִי רַחֲמָה!?	Is it your sin, my pitiful sister?![11]

Gordon dedicated his poem to "the daughter of Jacob who was raped by the son of Hamor," alluding to but not directly naming the biblical Dinah from Genesis 34. Gordon's association of his fellow Russian Jews with Dinah strengthens the

association of "aḥoti" with voicelessness and degradation, even as it aims to counter all this with the solution of immigration (in this case, to America). Once again, it is the brother/poetic speaker rather than the inert, sobbing sister/Israel who is endowed with agency and voice in the poem, and who promises an end to his sister's exilic humiliation. According to David Biale, "Zionism promised an erotic revolution for the Jews . . . the creation of a virile New Hebrew Man but also the rejection of the inequality of women found in traditional Judaism in favor of full equality between the sexes in all spheres of life."[12]

What happens, then, to these traditional figurations of the Hebrew sister-bride when Zionist literary sisters begin in earnest to join the literary ranks of their brothers, transforming from mere objects of (erotic) depiction or allegorical representatives of passive suffering to imagining subjects?[13] What happens to this familial image when young Shmuʾel Yosef Czaczkes and Devorah Baron each leave their respective traditional, natal homes with their strong familial ties, suffering the loss of a beloved parent within a year of their respective departures from home? Baron's father, Shabbetai Eliezer Baron, died of tuberculosis in the summer of 1908 when Devorah was studying and teaching in Kovno.[14] As for the young Czaczkes, his mother, Esther Farb Czaczkes, died on April 2, 1909, exactly a year after Shmuel Yosef leaves his parents' home and sibling ties in order to emigrate to Palestine.[15] Young Shmuel Yosef and Devorah end up living in the same neighborhood in Neve Tsedeq, sharing the same friends and literary "kin," including *Hapoʿel hatsʿair* editor Yosef Aharonovitz (who became Baron's husband in 1911) and fellow writer/editor Yosef Ḥayyim Brenner. What happens when these two writers write and later rewrite stories of sisters, brothers, mothers, and literary creativity?[16] How does an image of an *aḥot laʿet*—a sister of the pen—begin to take shape in their work?

WRITING THE SISTER, PART 1: AGNON'S "AḤOT"

Agnon's "Aḥot" was first published in *Hapoʿel hatsaʿir* in November 1910, a month before Baron's arrival in Palestine, and was subsequently revised and republished in the first and subsequent editions of *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul*.[17] Like Agnon's other autobiographically inspired, Jaffa-based *Hapoʿel hatsaʿir* stories, "Beʾerah shel Miryam" (1909), "Tishrei" (1911), and "Leilot" (1912), the latter two of which were published

under Baron's editorial watch, "Aḥot" features as its protagonist a young, aspiring, male poet torn between his office job, his literary ambitions, and his countervailing desire to pursue amorous encounters with multiple women.

Ziva Shamir analyzes Agnon's choice to name his protagonist Netaʿ Naʿaman in the earliest published version of the story and suggests that, in addition to Isaiah 17:10, where this phrase is used to berate the people of Israel for planting fine plants (*nitʿei naʿmanim*) and foreign vines to court foreign powers, this name alludes to the description of Esther in Yehuda Halevi's Purim poem, "Mi khamokh veʾein kamokh" as "Hayafah banashim netaʿ neʾeman" (היפה בנשים נטע נעמן, "the loveliest of women, a pleasant plant") and of the ideal groom in David Vital's *Sefer mikhtam leDavid* as "netaʿ neʾeman ufeʾer reʿim" (נטע נעמן ופאר רעים, "a pleasant plant and friends' splendor").[18] According to Shamir, these references to the Hebrew bookshelf paint a picture of an arrogant young writer who is convinced that there is no one else like him in the land.[19] The fact that the phrase "netaʿ naʿaman" serves as praise for both an exceptional woman and a man suggests a certain kind of gender blurring, which Shamir sees as a clue that the sister figure who appears later in the story is not merely a separate, flesh-and-blood female figure but an extension or aspect of the male protagonist or a representation of his creative essence, along the lines of the feminine Greek muse, or the Hebrew *Shekhinah*. However one chooses to view the sister here, as either person or symbol, it is undeniable that Naʿaman considers himself the major attraction of his own story, and that his sister serves his own particular emotional and aesthetic purposes.

Agnon's choice of the name "Naʿaman" for his poet-protagonist also plays on the tension expressed at the beginning of the story between his office work, his vocation as a Hebrew poet—a *neʿim zemirot Yisraʾel*, "a sweet singer in Israel, as King David is referred to in 2 Samuel 23:1—and his pleasure-seeking impulses.[20] This wordplay is signaled from the outset in the first section of the 1922 version of the story, where Naʿaman is described recalling "moments of pleasure [*noʿam*] at twilight" and then, upon leaving his office, debating how best to spend his time pleasurably, *binʿimim*.[21] Additional meaning comes from the story of the leprous Assyrian general, Naʿaman from 2 Kings 5, who, despite initial skepticism and resistance, receives healing from the prophet Elisha on the advice of an Israelite maidservant/war prisoner. The 2 Kings intertext hints to the reader that some

form of chastening shift or healing transformation will occur at the end of the story.

The opening of the story also sets Naʿaman up as a parodic, modern-day Moses. Like Moses singing at the Sea in Exodus 15, Naʿaman is portrayed as "singing his songs that are printed in journals" at evening by the Mediterranean Sea—"az yashir et shirav shenidpasim bekhitvei haʿitim"—a pretense that is immediately undercut and deferred by "shirat haḥayyim" ("the song of life"), a euphemism for the pursuit of sexual pleasure characteristic of the cultural mores of Jaffa at that time, as embodied in the women who regularly distract Naʿaman from his higher, writerly goals.[22]

The depiction of Naʿaman as he leaves his office and steps out into the sweltering gloom of evening in the first two versions of the story is especially dense with biblical allusions:

אכן עוד היום גדול, אמר נעמן בלבו, ואני אמרתי נדמיתי, לא אראה טובה עם ערב. ומדי דברו שלח שמאלו בין תלתלי שערותיו ובימינו שם את המכתבים אשר כתב, בארגז פי הדואר, צעד ארץ בגאון, כגיבור לרוץ אורח. ופתאום עלה על דעתו שעדיין אינו יודע: לאן?

Look, the day is still long [Gen 29:7], Naʿaman said to himself, and I had thought I was already undone [Isaiah 6:5], and I shan't see good in the evening. [Psalm 128:5].[23] And in the midst of speaking [Jeremiah 31:19],[24] he ran his left hand through the curls of his hair and with his right hand [Song of Songs 2:6 and 8:3][25] placed the letters he had written in the slot of the mailbox, strode across the ground with pride, like a strongman running his course [Psalms 19:6].[26] Suddenly it struck him that he still didn't know: Whither to go?[27]

According to Chaya Shacham, who identifies over fifty separate biblical intertexts in this one brief story, the biblical references in this passage, like others in the story, are clearly parodic, underscoring Naʿaman's vanity and self-absorption.[28] Amidst this pretentious intertextual thicket, it helps to single out two specific references of particular relevance to our discussion of traditions and shifts in the Hebrew literary representation of sisters. The first, which appears at the very beginning of the passage with the words "akhen hayom gadol" ("the day is still long"), alludes to the moment in Genesis 29, right before Jacob first meets Rachel, one of the Bible's most memorable sisters. Shacham argues that this "prepares the reader for the possibility of a romantic meeting, wherein Naʿaman might display his heroic superiority as Jacob does before the shepherds upon Rachel's advent to the well," or perhaps kiss his

beloved as Jacob kisses his cousin Rachel, a moment that indeed transpires at the end of the story but in a mysterious, unexpected form.[29] The second intertext comes from Song of Songs, a biblical text that is redolent, as previously mentioned, with references to a sister-bride-beloved—"Aḥoti kallah" (4:9, 10, 12; 5:1), "Aḥoti-raʿayati" (5:2)—and with fantasies of the lover being like a sister or a brother "yoneq shadei imi," who suckled the breasts of my mother (8:1–2). It also features, in its last chapter, a set of brothers pledging to enclose their sister under a turret and in boards of cedar once she comes of sexual age (8:8–9). The Song of Songs allusion in this passage appears in the description of Naʿaman running his hands through his own hair with his left hand while depositing the letters in the mailbox with his right. Instead of the two-handed erotic encounter depicted in Song of Songs 8:3, in which the Shulamite is encircled and supported by her beloved, Naʿaman's actions are depicted here as a form of narcissistic self-involvement. Even the climactic erotic encounter that comes at the end of the story suggests an autoerotic dynamic that serves the poet's own personal emotional goals rather than those of his sister or any other "other."

This sense of self-absorption is encapsulated in the description of Naʿaman's actions and ruminations upon leaving his office at the end of the day. Instead of going straight home to "commune with poesy," Naʿaman debates whether to dally with Eleanora or Tirtza (in the 1910 version) or with Adah or Zillah (in the 1922 and 1931 versions).[30] The revised names clearly bring to mind the biblical Lamekh, who recites a poem to his wives Adah and Zillah about his having slain a man for wounding him and another young man for bruising him (Genesis 4:19–25). Naʿaman's deliberations over Adah and Zillah thus link him with a guilt-ridden predecessor poet. They also bring to mind the famous midrash from Bereishit Rabbah 23:2 that associates Lamekh and his two wives with the sexual promiscuity of the flood generation.

The regressive, antediluvian, sinful associations with Adah and Zillah assume greater intensity in the Medusan description found in the later versions of the story, in which Zillah's full, wild, naked arms encircle Na'aman's neck "like snakes. Like the serpents of love that stand guard over a packed treasure chest."[31] In the 1910 version of the story, Eleanora is identified with an even more primeval, biblical aspect, as the description ends not with serpents of love guarding a locked treasure but with "snakes opening up the Garden of Eden before Adam."[32]

Women thus take characterological shape in the story as sinners and distractions of the flesh, or as reminders of the traditional imperative to marry and procreate.[33] The latter is suggested in the later versions of the story, where the names Hannah and Peninnah, reminiscent of the biblical co-wives from 1 Samuel 1, are added to the list of Naʿaman's potential love interests.[34] Despite this plethora of potential conjugal partners and Naʿaman's purported pride in being considered a "shiddukh hagun"—a proper, respectable match—Naʿaman evades connection in the story with any of these women. Instead, he is drawn to the house of his newly arrived sister, a turn that takes the story in an entirely different Freudian, narcissistic, doubly-incestuous direction.

According to Alan Mintz, what happens to Naʿaman in the latter part of "Aḥot," when he encounters his sister, who sits silently in a dark room, dressed in her dead boyfriend's winter coat, is "the undermining of his epic swagger, the undoing of his pose. . . . His sister is his double."[35] Support for this reading comes from the various doublings and repetitions that occur in the last two sections of the story on the level of phrases, words, sounds, and actions: the repeated references to trembling (neurotic? religious? sexual?), the use of a kind of biblical parallelism (for example, "Naʿaman yabbit velo yirʾeh, yirʾeh velo yakkir meʾumah," נעמן יביט ולא יראה, יראה ולא יכיר מאומה, "Na'aman didn't look and didn't see; didn't see and didn't recognize a thing"[36]), and the use of doubled word roots and consonants in such words as "melafefet" (מלפפת), "demamah" (דממה), "mezaʿazʿat" (מזעזעת) and "ʿafʿapehah" (עפעפיה).

But Naʿaman's sister is not just his double; she is also his opposite and, as Shamir suggests, his muse. She thus represents an amalgam of associations, even archetypes: a stand-in for his lost mother and natal home, a distillation of sister-as-lover and as mother, and a lost prior self.[37] In entering (or penetrating) his sister's room, Naʿaman experiences a fraught combination of hot and cold, trembling fear, sorrow, annoyance, desire, emotional release, and ultimately love, all of which resonates with psychoanalytic observations about the fundamentally ambivalent, even violent nature of sibling relationships. According to Freudian psychoanalyst and sibling theorist Juliet Mitchell,

> [t]he violence must be turned into love—but that possibility of love is already there in the love one has for oneself, what, in psychoanalytic

> terminology is called narcissism. How does narcissism become love of another, object love? It seems to me that ambivalence towards siblings is an integral part of this transformation.[38]

Naʿaman's ambivalence toward his sister reflects and amplifies his attitude toward their mother, with whom his sister is so closely identified. Naʿaman repeatedly notes with impatience how, like their departed mother, his sister never finishes a novel—a metaphor for stasis, unconsummated desire, and the antithesis of literary creation. Again, like their mother, his sister sits alone by the window.[39] According to Nehama Aschkenasy, the fenestrated woman in ancient art is linked to the cult of fertility and the entrance to the womb, although in certain biblical narratives, such as the depiction of the mother of Sisera waiting fruitlessly for her son to return from battle, the woman at the window symbolizes "the conception of the female sphere as hemmed in and sedentary."[40] Writing about the image of Michal standing by the window in 2 Samuel 6, Amy Kalmanofsky observes that, as "openings to the home, windows and doors mark the places where the home is most vulnerable and are associated in the Bible with individuals who exist on the margins of their families."[41] Naʿaman's sister, to whom he seems so inexorably pulled despite their pronounced differences, can thus be seen as reflecting Naʿaman's own sense of marginality, insecurity, and weakness despite his Lothario-like public presentation.

As Michal Arbell notes in her psychoanalytic study of artistic creativity in Agnon's fiction, it is difficult to capture what it means for a young person to detach from his family, his city, his spoken vernacular, and the society in which he was formed, with its culture and traditions and live on his own in a new country. By extension, it is difficult to capture what it means for this sort of person to write.[42] Naʿaman's climactic, fantastic, tearful and incestuous encounter with his sister thus constitutes a cathartic, dreamlike, wishful reunion with his lost, irretrievable origins, a way of inhabiting the new world of Jaffa while returning to his Old World natal home, too. It is worth recalling in this context Abramovitch's observations about the mythical biblical fantasy of the sister as ideal female romantic partner. Referring to the biblical Adam and Eve as the first brother-sister pair, Abramovitch points to Adam's cry of recognition, upon the creation of his partner/sister Eve: "This-time, she-is-it! Bone from my bones, flesh from my flesh" (Genesis 2:23).[43]

Sander Gilman adds a less idyllic, modern perspective about "inner marriage" in his cultural study of "Sibling Incest, Madness, and the 'Jews.'" According to Gilman, late nineteenth-century European antisemitism, as reflected in the writings of some of its most important cultural figures,

> saw the Jews as an essentially "ill" people" and linked this illness/madness to the "'dangerous' marriages of the Jews, that is, their refusal to marry beyond the inner group. . . . The claim was that Jews violated the incest taboo by repudiating the European/Christian rule of exogamy, which requires marriage outside of one's perceived inner group, such as the extended as well as the nuclear family.[44]

Read in this light, Agnon's "Aḥot" seems to be an exemplary modernist text, reflecting a proto-Freudian awareness of the centrality of sexuality to the human pysche—a nostalgic expression of yearning for primordial beginnings (over and against the depravity of the later diluvian age and more recent modern forms of promiscuity), as well as a symbolic turning away from antisemitic Europe in favor of a Zionist embrace of Jewish insularity and inbreeding, as symbolized in the protagonist's climactic kissing of his sister.[45]

Notably for our consideration of the image of the sister of the pen, the story portrays the sister as spurring the protagonist's catharsis and creative transformation. Recalling, however, the depiction of the Jewish people as grieving sister in the poems of Girondi and Gordon, Agnon's doleful, silent sister in "Aḥot" entirely lacks consciousness, life force, agency, and words of her own. She says nothing whatsoever when Naʿaman enters her room. Naʿaman sees her reading a book and asks her its title; the narrator reports that she tells him the title, although the reader does not hear this answer directly. In the 1922 and 1931 versions of the story, the sister speaks directly on only one occasion, and only to admit that she has not finished any of the novels she has attempted to read. She also questions the point of doing so; after all, "Mi yizkeh leʾaḥarit tovah"—who really comes to a good end, presumably given the ultimate, inexorable fact of human mortality?[46] In the final version of the story, even this single spoken line is omitted, its meaning instead intimated with her eyes instead of her mouth and given over to the narrator to articulate in words:

Ve'asher lo amrah befihah higgidu ʿeneha, ki ein adam baʾarets asher tovah aḥarito, "and said with her eyes what she didn't say with her mouth: no one on earth comes to a good end."[47]

After voicing these thoughts for her, Naʿaman breaks into tears, experiences an unprecedented rush of love, and kisses his sister, either on her hand or her mouth.[48] These climactic tears and kiss, projected against the sister's silence and lack of agency, recall Jacob's kiss of Rachel in Genesis 29 and his similarly tearful outburst—*vayyishaq Yaʿaqov leRaḥel vayyisa et-qolo vayyevk*, "And Jacob kissed Rachel, and raised his voice and wept"—insofar as neither text offers access to the reaction and feelings of the female relative being kissed. Yet, in contrast to Rachel, Agnon's sister remains unnamed; she is referred to repeatedly in possessive relation to Naʿaman, as "aḥoto" ("his sister") or "aḥoti" ("my sister"), which places Naʿaman's perspective and voice at the center of the story's action until the very end.

WRITING THE SISTER, PART 2: BARON'S "AḤOT." WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES FEMALE AUTHORSHIP MAKE?

I would like to use as the jumping off point for discussing this theme of literary sisterhood in Baron's 1910 story two letters to Baron that predate the publication of both stories and that specifically single out Baron as a literary sister. The first is a letter from a young aspiring male writer named Tzvi Zevulun Weinberg (1884–1971), who repeatedly addresses Baron as "Marat Devorah Baron—Aḥot laʿet" (מרת דבורה ברון – אחות לעט"), "Ms. Devorah Baron—Sister of the Pen!" (see figure 2).[49]

The second, from Brenner to Baron, is dated June 11, 1906 and appears in Brenner's collected letters alongside a stack of letters from the same year to a veritable "who's who" of contemporary male Hebrew and Yiddish editors and writers: Shimon Bikhovsky, Kalman Marmur, R. Binyamin, Uri Nissan Gnessin, Hillel Zeitlin, Daniel Persky, Gershon Schoffman, Joseph Klausner, and Y. D. Berkowitz. Baron is the one female addressee in the group:

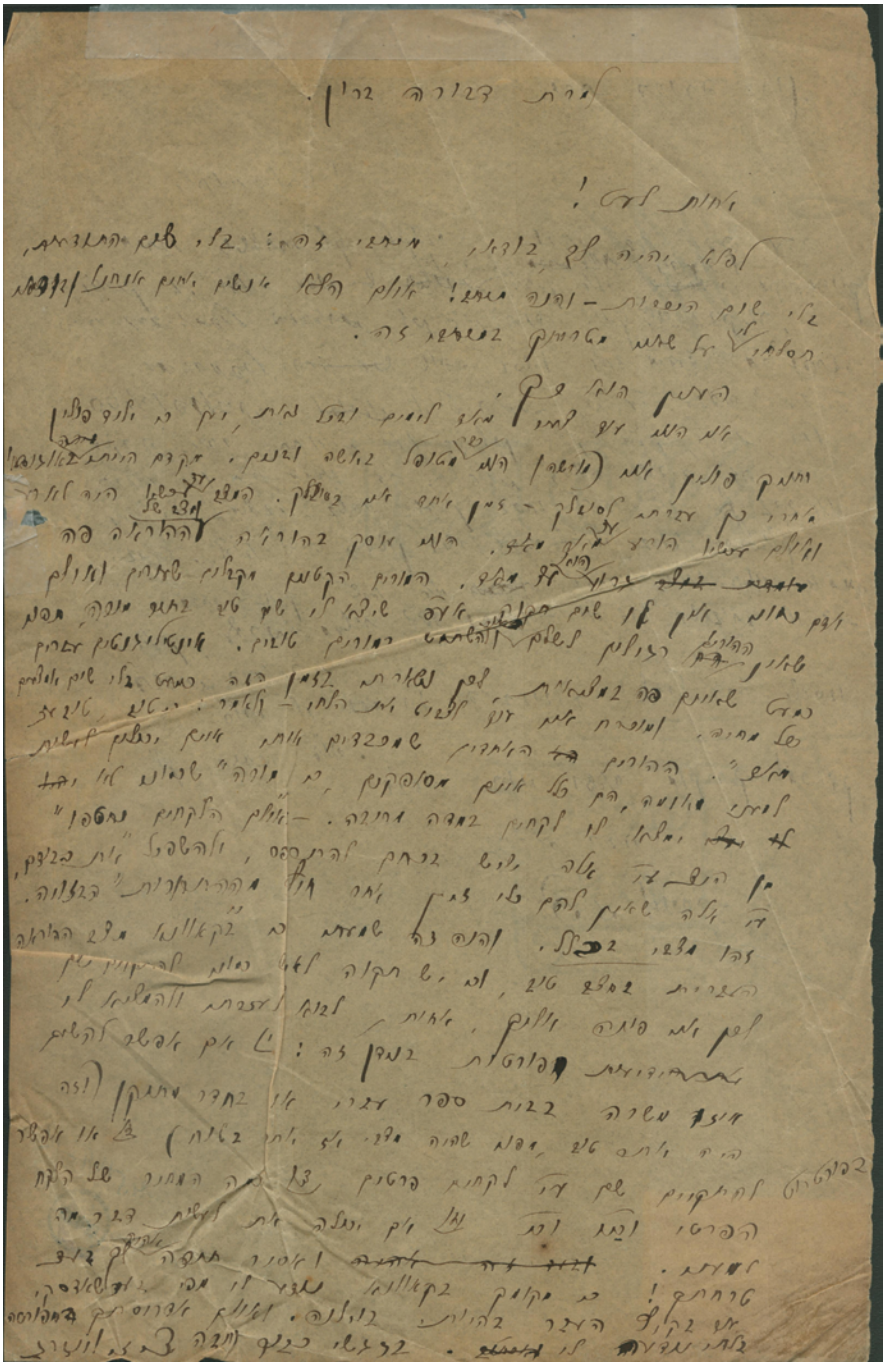

Figure 2: Letter From Tzvi Zevulun Weinberg to Devorah Baron

6/11/06, London	VI 11/06, לונדון.
To Devorah Baron	לדבורה בארון.
My sister,	**אחותי,**
Just now I happened to read your sketch,	זה עתה נזדמן לי לקרוא את
"Ache" in *The Time,* and I cannot hold	רשימתך "מיחוש" ב"הזמן", ואיני
back the feelings inside without coming	יכול להבליג על רגשותי בקרבי
before you and saying: Receive my thanks	ולבלי לבוא לפניך ולאמור לך:
and blessing, dear sister! You know how to	קבלי תודה וברכה, אחות יקרה!
write, **my sister**, and if you have anything	יודעת את לכתוב, **אחותי**, ואם יש
else like this in your hands, please grant it	עוד תחת ידך מכיוצא בה, אנא זכי
to *Hameʿorer,* and my soul will bless you for	את "המעורר" בו ותברכך נפשי.
it. At my dear friend Ben-Eliezer's behest	על-פי הצעת יקירי בן-אליעזר
I sent you *Hameʿorer,* but I'm not sure that	שלחתי לך את "המעורר", אך ספק
you received it. Can you check? With	בידי, אם קיבלת אותו. התעניני?
brother's blessing.	בברכת-**אח**
Yosef Ḥaim Brenner	יוסף חיים ברֶנֶר
48 Mile Wnd. Rd. E. London	48 Mile Wnd. Rd. E. London[50]

Brenner followed this with another letter dated VII/7/06, which addressed Baron as *Aḥoti hayeqarah-hayeqarah*, "my dear, dear sister," and offered revision notes for one of her sketches. In comparison to the rather withering critique that Brenner offers other (male) writers in this same collection of letters, Brenner's reception of Baron's work is frankly adulatory. All of this suggests that Baron was eagerly welcomed and embraced by her would-be male literary "brothers."

This positive reception notwithstanding, Baron remained keenly aware of the general absence of women in the Hebrew literary and editorial ranks. A rabbi's daughter, who was granted privileged but not unfettered access to Jewish learning, she knew well that traditional Jewish culture had impeded the development of female intellectual and literary capacity and sisterhood, and that such treatment was not entirely of the past. Even with the warm welcome she received from her Yiddish and Hebrew literary peers, she was cognizant of the ways in which male writers and editors, dating back to the Haskalah, promoted the idea of female Hebraism, even as they perpetuated discriminatory notions of feminine difference.[51] That Baron's first book of stories did not appear until 1927, despite repeated plans for publication, is proof enough that stumbling blocks were placed not only before women of previous generations, but before her as well.

All of this becomes readily apparent, I would argue, in the differences between Agnon's "Aḥot" and Baron's "Aḥot." Although published within months of one another in 1910, these stories offer markedly divergent and distinctly gendered portraits of the Hebrew sister. Agnon draws on traditional biblical and liturgical representations of the sister but recasts them in a modernist, Freudian, dreamscape form, while Baron attempts to rewrite or rebirth the biblical and rabbinic representation of the sister as if from scratch. If Naʿaman's climactic encounter with a silent, inert sister in Agnon's "Aḥot" occasions a cathartic, artistic breakthrough for its male protagonist, the impending arrival of a new sibling in Baron's "Aḥot" constitutes a psycho-literary crisis that the twelve year-old female protagonist (and first-person narrator) must find some way to work through in order to achieve her own literary and moral breakthrough.

Published in *Haʿolam* on August 18, 1910, Baron's story begins with a description that strangely anticipates the latter section of Agnon's "Aḥot," with its ambivalent depiction of the dark eyes of Naʿaman's sister, her imponderable silence, and her similarity to their mother. Before the retrospective eyes of Baron's narrator, as a nostalgic symbol of the past, the image of her mother rises up, the rebbetzin's primordially deep, dark, and sad eyes, like "two black abysses [*tehomot*], anguish peering up from them."[52] The rebbetzin mother in Baron's "Aḥot" appears perennially covered and silent: "Did she also have beautiful hair?" wonders the daughter narrator? "Did she have a nice voice? Who knows? She was a 'בת ישראל צנועה'—a modest Jewish woman who never raised her voice in her life and her head was always covered with a wig, even around her family"[53] The narrator's use of the traditionally laudatory epithet "bat Yisraʾel tsenuʿah" is both admiring and ironic.[54] But, unlike Naʿaman, whose masculine gender allows him to distinguish himself from his mother and sister even as he fuses with them, Baron's daughter/sister narrator seems destined to reproduce the feminine views and ways of her mother and female kin—that is, until the end of the story, where she assumes her own version of the maternal/sororal role and claims a voice and stance of her own.

At the story's opening, the narrator's mother once again is pregnant, and everyone in the family, male and female alike, is praying for a son. The narrator's maternal grandfather, father of ten daughters, stares desperately at the shelves of holy books in his rabbinic son-in-law's house, hoping that a boy will finally be born to use these books, the assumption being that only sons and brothers can carry on the rabbinic,

ritual, and literary legacy.[55] Tragically, the women in the family—a veritable catalog of sisters—all seem to subscribe to this same misogynist viewpoint. The narrator's maternal aunt arrives in the home specifically to prepare the celebratory food and sew the clothes for a baby boy. Her paternal aunt interprets her sister-in-law's rosy cheeks as a positive sign that she will indeed have a son. The narrator herself imagines a little boy angel who hovers over the house and showers it with joy. This salvific image of a baby boy is further reinforced by the narrator's rabbinic father, who, buoyed by the prospect of a son, begins spending more time at home and recounting stories from his own illustrious boyhood as the youngest and only son in a family of daughters. The rabbi's stories are replete with stock epithets for masculine talmudic brilliance, both his own and his father's, which the daughter narrator eagerly parrots, paradoxically displaying her own facility with rabbinic parlance. Already as a toddler the rabbi had clung eagerly to the dust of his scholarly father (m. Avot 1:4), at least by the rabbi's own account; by age seven he was quick to comprehend and slow to forget (m. Avot 5:12); by ten, he was an "ʿoqer harim" (an "uprooter of mountains"), a stock epithet for intellectual acuity; by the time of his bar mitzvah, he was *maʿayan hamitgabber*, a spring that continually gathered force (like Rabbi Eleazar ben Arach in m. Avot 2:8). The rabbi's almost parodically narcissistic self-description injects a subtle strain of comic relief in an otherwise dire and gloomy feminist protest story.[56] His rehearsal of his bar mitzvah speech supplies additional irony insofar as the narrator of the story is herself twelve years old and thus has also reached the age of majority, an occasion celebrated in her community only for boys, not for girls.[57] Adding insult to injury is the subject matter of father's bar mitzvah talk—the value of the mitzvot and their reward—given that women are halakhically exempt from Torah study and timebound commandments, and thus presumably less deserving of recognition.[58]

And so her father's story ends, the central point being that, just as his own righteous mother gave birth to a son (himself) at an advanced age, the same might happen for him and his wife. But the hoped-for son never comes. After two days of painful labor, the narrator's mother finally gives birth to another daughter. The narrator's maternal grandfather abruptly leaves the house, never to return, his (phallic) walking stick reverberating mournfully on the floor like the knock of the gravedigger on the graveyard gates.[59] The women in the house begin crying, each of them in a different corner, divided against themselves, a whole house of dolorous sisters.

Fittingly, the birth of the narrator's new sister occurs during the traditional period of mourning between the 17th of Tammuz and Tishʿah b'Av, setting it against the backdrop of national catastrophe. Even the books in the bookcase are depicted morbidly, laid out in rows like tombstones in a graveyard. The aforementioned bookcase, twice named in this section as "haʾaron" rather than "aron hasefarim," takes on a similarly deathly aspect insofar as the word "aron" also connotes a coffin.

As such, the rabbi-father's behavior in "Aḥot" bears all the markers of a man in mourning.[60] Observing *shivʿah*, he neither changes his clothes nor trims his nails. He does not even go to synagogue to name the baby girl. The narrator thus experiences the birth of her younger sister as a family tragedy, the dripping, shrinking wax of the Sabbath candles likened to the tears of the imagined little boy angel now that the Shekhinah has abandoned their home.

In a marked lack of female solidarity, the narrator prefers her rabbi-father to anyone and everyone else, admitting that she cares little about the cries of her mother, sisters, and aunts, as "they were only women."[61] The narrator's excessive regard for her father's feelings and countervailing contempt for her mother's postpartum misery reflects what Adrienne Rich famously called "Matrophobia"—that is, a tendency to blame the effects of patriarchy not on fathers but on mothers. As Marianne Hirsch similarly observes in the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Afro-American women's writing, "the heroine who wants to write, or who wants in any way to be productive or creative, then, must break from her mother so as not to be identified with maternal silence."[62]

The narrator's matrophobia reaches its climax when she hears something fall in the sleeping alcove and immediately deems that "zoʾt hi haʾashemah bakkol," "it was Mother whose fault this all was."[63] The narrator's pronouncement of her mother's guilt *bakkol* recalls the midrash in Genesis Rabbah 59:7 on Genesis 24, where the Bible describes God as having blessed Abraham *bakkol*, "with everything." According to the view of R. Nehemiah, the meaning of the word *bakkol* here is that God never gave Abraham a daughter. Included in the same midrashic passage, however, is R. Yudan's counterinterpretation, which suggests that *bakkol* means that God blessed Abraham *with* a daughter. The narrator's condemnation of her mother as *ashemah bakkol* thus teeters on an interpretive edge, connoting either complete blame or absolute blessing.

It is at this razor's-edge moment that the narrator's attitude suddenly shifts. When her mother, so disturbed by her father's hyperbolic display of grief, actually drops her baby girl on the ground, it is none other than the sister-narrator who rushes into the bedroom to respond to the baby's sobbing. The mother dropping her baby signals a disruption of the regular maternal order and an opportunity for the narrator to assume control both on an emotional and a narrative level. The narrator suddenly recognizes that this new baby girl has the same deep black eyes as their mother—another uncanny parallel to Naʿaman's sister in Agnon's "Aḥot," who was noted for her distinctive dark eyes. Herself the youngest girl in the family, Baron's narrator has no real idea how to soothe and quiet this yet unnamed and unwanted baby sister. Despite all this, and despite her prior antipathy for all the females in her family, a stream of warm feeling rises up within her, another detail that resonates with Agnon's "Aḥot" insofar as Naʿaman experiences at the story's end an unexpected welling-up of love.

But, whereas Naʿaman's sister and Baron's rebbetzin-mother never raise their voices, when Baron's narrator steps in to care for her baby sister, she literally screams out her consolation: "Hush-sh-sh, my little one, sh-sh-sh, my baby, sh-sh-sh, my sister, yes, you are my sister, my si-s-ter . . ."—five epithets for the new baby, as if to match the number of sisters in the family.[64] And then she bursts into tears, at which point she hears her father sing an especially sad *niggun* as he withdraws (*poresh*) into a distant corner to pray the Maʿariv service, a clear sign that the narrator no longer shares her father's interpretive point of view, the Hebrew root *peh-resh-shin*, meaning both "to separate" and "to interpret." Evening—in Jewish tradition, the beginning of a new day—peeks in (*metsits*, מציץ) through the window, recalling the new baby's dark eyes peeking out (*metsitsot*, מציצות) from her slushed swollen face and the books that peeked out (*hetsitsu*, הציצו) from the "aron."[65] Something new and unprecedented begins to peer out at the world, a new sense of sisterhood and literary perspective as symbolized by the row of books. Sadly, however, for this perspective to be nurtured, it will have to move beyond the constraints of this patriarchal home. Recalling the blessing that Rebecca receives at the moment when she departs forever from home—the moment with which I started this article—the narrator's embrace of sisterhood foreshadows her eventual departure and emigration from her natal home even as it augurs the future progeny of her pen.

On the surface, then, Baron's "Aḥot" and Agnon's "Aḥot" end identically, with their protagonists kissing or embracing their sisters, with sisters substituting for mothers, and with sororally inspired tears. Both stories show their protagonists constructing a sense of sibling connection as a means of anchoring oneself to but also severing from the past. And in each of these stories, the grief and loss suffered or embodied by sisters serve as catalysts and subject for fiction. But there is a distinction. Agnon's story leaves the sister largely static and inert, seemingly incapable of reading let alone writing a story to its conclusion and thereby rendering storytelling and writing the exclusive province of the male artist/narrator. In Baron's "Aḥot," the sister serves not just as protagonist but as narrator and shaper of the story, its emotional focal point and narrative consciousness, a sister of heart as well as the pen.

REWRITING THE SISTER, PART 1: AGNON'S BIDMI YAMEHA (1923)

Notably, both Agnon and Baron return to and revise these early sister portraits in later works of fiction—in Agnon's case, with his novella *Bidmi yameha*, which replaces "Aḥot" as the opening story of *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul* in all later editions. About a year after the publication of the first edition of *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul* in Berlin in 1922, which included a substantially revised version of the story "Aḥot," Agnon published the novella *Bidmi yameha* (*In the Prime of Her Life*) in the Warsaw-based journal *Hatequfah*.[66] Scores of studies have been devoted to the story of Tirtza Mazal's dogged but misbegotten efforts to correct the wrongs committed by her mother, Leah Mintz, by marrying Leah's erstwhile lover, Akavia Mazal.[67] Writers and scholars have delved into the triangulated love patterns in the novella, as well as Tirtza's desire—suggested by the meaning of her name, "she will want"—to re-embody the story and character of her mother so as to bring it, finally, to a proper conclusion of consummated desire.[68] Amos Oz writes of Tirtza's status as a neglected child and her consequent wish, after her mother's death, to fuse with the image of her mother to the point of self-negation.[69] Eddy Tsemaḥ writes of Tirtza's life as a (failed) second edition of Leah's life, one that can end, like Leah's, only in death.[70] Ilana Pardes writes of Tirtza as a modern-day Ruth, alienated in her own familial home, trying by way of her Bible-tinged narration to reconnect with her

mother Leah, whom Pardes likens to the biblical Naomi.[71] Nitza Ben-Dov speaks of Tirtza as an imitator who traces her mother's narrative footsteps but when that model exhausts itself, proceeds to imitate her spiritual father Akavia and his narrative/memoiristic project, a form of behavior that Ben-Dov likens to a Freudian repetition compulsion.[72]

But repetition with a difference is not merely imitation; it is also revision. Indeed, one way to read *Bidmi yameha*—which includes doublings and repetitions not only of the amorous and literary patterns of Leah and Akavia, but also of themes, motifs, phrases, and words from Agnon's 1910 story, "Aḥot"—is as an elaboration and revision of that earlier work, one that recapitulates but also displaces the story from Jaffa to Galicia and changes the central perspective from a man to a woman. Common or repeated elements from "Aḥot" are discernible from the very first paragraph of *Bidmi yameha*:

""בדמי ימיה"	"אחות"
בדמי ימיה מתה אמי. כבת שלושים שנה ושנה אחת היתה אמי במותה. מעט ורעים היו ימי שני חייה. כל היום **ישבה** בבית ומן הבית לא יצאה.	ככה **ישבה** אמו עליה השלום. (עמ׳ תו׳)
רעותיה ושכנותיה לא באו לבקרה וגם אבי לא הקדיש את קרואיו. **דומם** עמד ביתנו ביגונו.	**ודממת החדר**. נעמן הביט לחדר. דבר אין לראות בחדר, זולתי חלל אפל השוקט על נפשו . . . נעמן נכסוף נכסף למחוץ את **הדממה** העמוקה ולקרקר כל יגון החדר. (עמ׳ תו׳)
דלתיו לזר לא נפתחת. **על מטתה שכבה אמי**	**והיתה שוכבת על ערש דוי** וקוראת רומנים (עמ׳ תו׳)
ודבריה היו מעטים. ובדברה כמו נפרשו כנפים זכות ויובילני אל היכל הברכה. מה אהבתי את קולה. פעמים הרבה פתחתי את הדלת למען תשאל מי בא.	ויאמר [אל אחותו] האמנם לא שמעת כי איש בא החדרה. (עמ׳ תו׳)
ילדות היתה בי. לעתים ירדה מעל משכבה **ותשב בחלון**. **היא ישבה בחלון** ובגדיה היו לבנים. פעם נקרא דוד אבי בעירנו וירא את אמי ויחשוב **כי אחות רחמנית היא** [. . .] .	היא יושבת כעוטיה **על יד החלון**. (עמ׳ תו׳)
ובשובו לעת ערב הביתה ישב [אבי] על יד אמי, **שמאלו** תחת לראשו תחת לראשו וימינו בימינה.	ומדי דברו שלח **שמאלו** בין תלתלי שערותיו ובימינו שם את המכתבים אשר כתב. (עמ׳ תה׳)

In The Prime of Her Life	"Sister"
My mother died in the prime of her life. She was barely thirty-one years old. Few and harsh were the days of her life.[74] **She sat at home** the entire day and never stirred from within.	**Thus sat my mother**, peace be with her.
Her friends and neighbors did not visit, nor did my father welcome guests. **Our house stood hushed** in sorrow, its doors did not open to a stranger. Lying on her bed my mother spoke scarcely a word, But when she did speak it was as though limpid wings had spread forth and led me to the hall of blessing.	**The silence of the room**. Naʿaman l looked at the room. There was nothing to see in the room, other than a gloomy space, silencing his soul. Naʿaman longed to crush this silence and chuckle away all the sorrow in the room.
How I loved her voice. Often I would open her door just to hear her ask, **Who's there?**	And he said, **didn't you hear that someone came into the room?**
I was still a child. Sometimes she rose from her bed to sit **by the window**. She would sit **by the window** dressed in white. She always wore white. Once a relative of my father's was called into town and seeing my mother, **took her for a nurse**, for her clothes misled him and he did not realize she was the one who was unwell. [. . .]	She would sit as if veiled **by the window**.
Returning home at dusk he [my father] would sit by my mother's side, **his left hand** behind his head and **her right hand** held in his own. And every so often she would lean forward and kiss his hand.	And whenever he spoke, he would cast **his left hand** into the curls of his hair, and with **his right hand** place the letters he had written [in the mailbox].

The similarities between Agnon's *Bidmi yameha* and Agnon's "Aḥot," as exemplified in the above side-by-side comparison, are legion. Like Naʿaman's mother—"peace be with her"—Tirtza's mother, Leah Mintz, is portrayed as having died young, in the prime of her life. Similarly, like Naʿaman's mother (and sister, too), Leah never leaves the house, a form of reclusive, melancholic behavior that Tirtza will come to

emulate later in the novella as part of her effort to fuse with her mother.[76] Naʿaman and Tirtza alike yearn to open the door and to disrupt the oppressive silence of their mothers' (and sister's) rooms. Each of them describes their mothers as constantly lying in bed and sitting by the window. Naʿaman's mother is depicted reading novels that she never finishes. Similarly, in *Bidmi yameha*, Tirtza's mother is seen shortly after this passage obsessively reading a bundle of letters.[77] The illustration of Leah as habitually wearing white, such that she is mistaken for an "aḥot raḥmaniyah," the Hebrew term for "nurse" (literally "compassionate sister"), recalls the title of the previous short story and adds an additional connotation to the word *aḥot*, one that amplifies the confusion between sickness, lovesickness, and filial identity and underscores the sister's role in the earlier story in healing Naʿaman. At the very end of the passage from *Bidmi yameha* quoted above, Leah's father, a legume (*qitniyot*) merchant—a detail that recalls the symbolic importance in Baron's "Aḥot" of beans or chickpeas in the celebration of the birth of a son—is pictured sitting by his wife, Leah, "his left hand behind his head and her right hand held in his own," a physical orientation that evokes the previously mentioned description of Naʿaman running his left hand through the curls of his hair while his right hand places the letters in the mailbox. In neither story, however, does the Song of Songs intertext amount to a reciprocal, amorous connection; rather, it involves a narcissistic or one-sided arrangement.

As one would expect from the longer form of the novella, many of the central themes and motifs from "Aḥot" are considerably developed or heightened in the later work. After Leah's death, Mr. Mintz reads Akavia Mazal's epitaph for Leah "letummo" ("to its conclusion"), a phrasing that recalls Naʿaman's reiterated encouragement of his sister to finish reading a novel "letumo."[78] In *Bidmi yameha*, however, Agnon complicates this phrase by using it to refer both to bringing an action to a conclusion and to speaking naively, creating a sense of ambiguity around the supposed innocence of the characters as well as Tirtza's capacity to effect a positive end to her story.

If Agnon's "Aḥot" ends with cathartic tears and an incestuous kiss between brother and sister, *Bidmi yameha* recapitulates the tears and expands this incest theme, too, propelling them in a destructive direction. At the end of the novella, Tirtza describes sitting with her father and husband and wanting to cry: "Now I glance at my father's face, and now at my husband's. I behold two men and long to cry, to cry in my mother's bosom."[79] But, whereas the climactic tears at the end of

"Aḥot" come with a welling up of love, the tears at the end of *Bidmi yameha* connote lack rather than love, a point underscored at that very moment by Tirtza's recollection of the story of Mintshi Gottlieb's nephew mistaking Gottlieb for his father: "Gottlieb lifted the boy up in the air and danced, but his brother entered and the boy glanced now at Gottlieb and now at his brother, and he turned his face away from them both and in a fit of tears he flung his arms out at his mother."[80]

According to Pardes, in

> embracing her mother's amorous choice and seducing Akavia Mazal, the man who could have been her father, Tirtza drifts into an unsettling, incestuous realm. There is no biblical or civil law that Tirtza and Mazal violate by marrying, but psychologically the attraction to a father substitute can be as disconcerting as literal incest.[81]

Tirtza aims in marrying Akavia to right the wrongs of the previous generation, but the literal meaning of Akavia's name as "the crookedness of God" suggests that her plan to marry him is twisted and fated to fail. And so, while the male writer Naʿaman's kiss of his silent, sequestered sister in "Aḥot" effects a breakthrough and allows him to have his Jaffa and his maternal home, too, Tirtza's union with Mazal only highlights the unbridgeable chasm between her and her (dead) mother.

The act of writing and the deferral thereof are central to both stories, but this dynamic is especially pronounced in *Bidmi yameha*. As Arbell notes, the entire novella revolves around writing: Mazal writes letters and poems to Leah, which she burns before her death; he also writes the story of his lost love for Leah as well as a chronicle of Szybusz; Gottlieb copies and shares Mazal's memoirs with Tirtza; Mazal and Mintz collaborate in the task of writing Leah's epitaph; a student at the teacher's seminary writes a lost love letter to Mazal, while Landau writes love letters to Tirtza; and finally, Tirtza writes her own memoirs.[82] Tirtza creates a living drama, an ongoing plot, and casts herself in the role of her mother, too, rehearsing all of the major moments and motifs of her mother's story to the point where she loses all sense of individuation.[83] Even her claims at the end of the novella, that she writes "ʿal asher emtsa margoʿa"—for the purpose of finding relief or in order to relax—suggests a lack of peace or relief despite having achieved her purported romantic goal.

Feminist critics have noted the singularity of Agnon's Tirtza as narrator, what Naomi Sokoloff refers to as the centrality in the novella of "the silencing and sounding of female voice."[84] In his 1919 story "Aggadat hasofer," Agnon passingly refers to the emerging phenomenon of Hebrew women's writing by way of a conversation between Raphael the scribe and a visitor passing by, who reports "that in the house of another even girls sit and write."[85] Tirtza Mintz Mazal, however, is the first actual woman writer/narrator in Agnon's corpus, and *Bidmi yameha* constitutes Agnon's first and only portrait of the female Hebrew literary artist as a young woman.

Arnold Band highlights the naïve pastoral biblical style of Tirtza's narration, redolent of Song of Songs, the book of Ruth, and Abraham Mapu's 1853 novel, *Ahavat Tsiyyon* (*Love of Zion*). According to Band, Tirtza transmits all of the details that she knows, but she does not know how to filter information or connect the details that are obvious to the reader.[86] Pardes notes how her outmoded, biblically infused, maskilic writing style separates Tirtza from Zionism as much as it does the surrounding Eastern European community.[87] As such, she is a writer of limited authority, influence, and control.

Indeed, despite her seeming desire, determination, and activism in pursuing her goals, Tirtza proves largely to be a puppet of other people's designs. A. B. Yehoshua writes of Mr. Mintz's guilt over his role in preventing Leah's marriage to her beloved Mazal and his decision to bring Tirtza with him to visit Mazal. This move effectively sets in motion Tirtza's quest to unite with Mazal and renders her actions less a function of her own agency than of her father's manipulations.[88] Others emphasize the hand of Leah's friend Gottlieb in fomenting the love plot.[89] Sokoloff traces Tirtza's effort to claim a voice "in a society that discourages outspokenness by women":

> She turns, significantly, to the form of writing often favored by women: the diary or memoir not intended for publication but meant to provide an outlet for emotion and a forum for self-expression. Her purposes of self-definition and self-expression are stymied, though, because she finds herself unhappily trapped in a discourse much larger than her own imagined script of events.[90]

Along these lines, Ben-Dov notes the oddity of Tirtza's description of her writing as her "zikhronot" ("memoirs"), when Tirtza lacks the distance and perspective that typically attends retrospective life writing.[91] Shamir adds to this a reading of *Bidmi yameha* as an allegorical representation of the futile nature of Eastern European and German Jewish life. Instead of shaping and writing the story of a life that would connect her to her New Jew/Zionist suitor Landau, whose very name connects him to the Land, Tirtza seals her fate (her *mazal*) with the bookish, luftmensch, Akavia Mazal.[92]

And so, *Bidmi yameha* may give us Tirtza as a woman who desires and writes, but the plot, idiom, longings, and narrative control are not her own. As such, Tirtza seems to symbolize the inevitable failure of the Hebrew writing project in the diaspora, the female writer essentially embodying this doomed project and fusing with the conventional image of diaspora Jewry as an exilic little sister. It will fall to Baron, then, in revising her own "Aḥot," to provide a model of the kind of female Hebrew narrator who demonstrates control over the various allusive materials embedded in the narrative and a mature, retrospective point of view.

REWRITING THE SISTER, PART 2: BARON'S "HAYOM HARISHON" AND "BERESHIT"

There is a raw directness to Baron's "Aḥot," an explicit venting of feminist ire that Baron renounced in her later writing; she famously omitted "Aḥot" and other such protest stories from her collected works, dubbing them "smartutim" ("rags").[93] Despite this shunning of her earlier stories, though, Baron, like Agnon, reworked several of her earlier stories and repurposed them into something new. Naomi Seidman analyzes Baron's choice of the metaphor of *smartutim* and its use in Baron's 1908 "Genizah" to describe *tkhines* literature, noting that, "aside from their domestic usefulness," rags are "also the raw material of women's *bricolage*, to reclaim Claude Levi-Strauss' term for the female crafts. Baron's reworking of earlier material in her later work may [thus] be the perfect example of female ingenuity in creating art from the discarded and outworn."[94]

Baron's "Aḥot," I believe, affords another metaphor for female literary re-creation, that of the baby sister who is at first shunned and dropped, and then re-embraced, who symbolizes a once-discarded literary subject, metaphor, or plot that the

narrator later picks up and reworks into an even more significant and far-reaching form as a figure of literary solidarity. The two later stories that explicitly reprise and repurpose the sister plot of Baron's "Aḥot" are "Hayom harishon" ("The First Day") and "Bereshit" ("In the Beginning"), both of which are included in Baron's first published book, *Sippurim* (1927). Each of these stories metafictionally links the birth of a daughter/sister to the biblical creation story, foregrounding the power of feminist narrative revision and female literary sisterhood.

Considerable overlap is evident between Baron's "Aḥot" and "Hayom harishon." Early on in both stories, the father is whisked away to serve as a *sandek* at a circumcision as a way contrasting the celebratory nature of a son's birth with the woeful reception of a daughter. "Hayom harishon" enlarges upon this contrast by making the newly-born boy the son of a neighboring wealthy landowner whose wife had previously refused a match with the narrator's rabbinic father, thereby linking inequalities of gender with those of class. In both "Aḥot" and "Hayom harishon," the son-favoring view is most staunchly represented by grandparents—that is, the older generation. In "Hayom harishon," however, it is specifically the paternal grandmother who represents this position most crankily, a move that blurs the gender divide and shows how antifeminist women effectively undermine would-be female emotional and intellectual solidarity.

The old rebbetzin/grandmother in the story (a character type that appears throughout Baron's corpus) is noted for her "awesome erudition" gleaned not firsthand but from her proximity to learned men: "Like giant boulders the sayings rolled from her mouth, one heavier and more frightening than the next,"[95] a depiction that proves deeply ironic, given that when her new granddaughter is born the grandmother needs to call upon the bookbinder's son, who lives next door, to write a letter to her husband informing him of the birth. Throughout the story the grandmother quotes classical sources but only those that speak derogatorily about women. A more thorough knowledge would yield a more nuanced and ambivalent attitude, as we previously saw in R. Yehuda's gloss on the word "bakkol," a commentary referenced in "Hayom harishon" by the narrator herself.[96] Moreover, if one compares the description of the grandmother's "beqiʾut" ("broad knowledge") to the various accolades heaped on the bar mitzvah destined to be a rabbi in "Aḥot," one sees that it is not typical to speak of knowledge in terms of heavy boulders. Indeed, there is

something cumbersome, heavy-handed, and mean-spirited about the grandmother's habit of quotation, a practice that Baron's narrator subtly undermines.

In telling the story of her birth, including visual details that no baby could reasonably remember firsthand, Baron's narrator assumes a bold and inventive authorial position akin to that of the biblical author.[97] Indeed, the idea of narrating one's own birth conveys a desire to take control of her life from the very beginning. Notably, however, and in contrast to the narrator of "Aḥot," the female narrator of "Hayom harishon" does not stand completely alone in her re-creative narrative project; rather, she has a sister who helps her. "All this"—that is, her knowledge of what happened that day before her actual birth—she tells the reader, "I heard later from my sister, who also told me a few other things about the past, which was as interesting to me as it was to her."[98]

As signaled by its title, Baron's "Bereshit" ("In the Beginning") builds further on this connection between narration and biblical creation. The story offers two versions of the story of the arrival of the new rebbetzin of Zhuzhikovka, thereby mimicking the two versions of the creation story in Genesis 1 and 2: first, a wealth-conscious description of the grand city house where the rebbetzin was brought up and her teary outburst upon seeing her dilapidated new home, and second, a more sympathetic, even humorous, account, which serves as the basis for the rest of the narrative. "This whole story," the narrator writes, "should begin differently, in a more appropriate version, and here it is."[99]

As part of this revised opening, the head of the community orders a sweeping of the streets and a scrubbing of the shul in honor of the new rabbi's arrival. All members of the community cook and bake in honor of the occasion, bathe and shampoo their children. Most notably, the townspeople make "sure to darn their tattered clothing"—את קרעי בגדיהם טרחו לאחות, *et qirʿei bigdeihem tarḥu leʾeḥot*, the Hebrew word word *leʾeḥot* meaning "to mend a tear."[100] This calls to mind Seidman's discussion of female handicrafts and the word *aḥot* ("sister"), as well as the metaphorical description of the curtains in the biblical tabernacle: *ḥovrot ishah el aḥotah*, חוברות אשה אל אחותה, "each attached to one another–a woman to her sister" (Exodus 25:3).[101] Baron's "Bereshit" thus tells the story of the young displaced rebbetzin's developing connection to her small town synagogue community and their ways and the eventual birth of a daughter by way of metaphors of restitching and sororal attachment.

According to the second account, the rabbi and rebbetzin arrive together, and the entire community makes a heroic effort to greet the couple at the train station. In this account, the rebbetzin also cries upon arrival at the synagogue, but this time she does so in response to being accosted by a she-goat. The rabbi teases her for being a young, inexperienced she-goat herself—a patronizing comment, to be sure, but one that also serves as a metaphor for the personal (and artistic) development the story traces. This incident anticipates the rebbetzin's burgeoning sense of care and concern for the she-goat as symbolic of her emerging connection to the natural surroundings and workings of the town.[102] It also prefigures the rebbetzin's yearning for a child, which is cast against the backdrop of *Parashat Vayetze* (Genesis 28:10–32:3), and the similar yearning of the biblical Rachel, whose proper name doubles as the Hebrew word for she-goat/ewe.[103]

As the story continues, the references to the various weekly Torah portions and the rabbi's sermon-writing meld with the narrator's description of the seasons, weather, and chores in the town, reflecting an interweaving of the social, ethnographic, and intellectual strands of the story. Recalling the references in "Aḥot" to the purchase of *qitniyot* ("legumes" or "chickpeas") in anticipation of the birth of a son (as well as Mintz's vocation in *Bidmi yameha* as a legume merchant), the rabbi is espied bringing home a sack of *qitniyot*, a sign of an impending birth.[104]

Early on in the story, when the rabbi and rebbetzin arrive, they are seen walking into town with the congregation's leaders at the rabbi's right and left, evoking, in rag-tag fashion, the depiction of the Israelites walking through the split Red Sea, the water standing like a wall on their left and their right (Exodus 14:22).[105] As time passes and the rebbetzin becomes more authentically fused with the community, the narrator returns to the Exodus story, referring this time to *Shabbat Shirah*, the Sabbath when congregations traditionally read Moses's and Miriam's Song of the Sea (Exodus 15), with the Song of Deborah (Judges 5) serving as the Haftarah—two crucial texts for feminist readers of the Bible. In quoting from Deborah's song, the narrator blends biblical verses that lift the narrative up to the heavens, with a description of a lunchtime feeding a flock of birds, referring to an old ashkenazic custom to feed the birds on Shabbat Shirah because of their work in removing the mannah that had been left over by the villainous Datan and Aviram.

> *They that are delivered from the noise of archers in the places of drawing water, there they shall rehearse the righteous acts of the Lord, They fought from heaven the stars in their courses fought against Sisera*—And during lunch, when the door was opened so that the crumbs could be thrown to the birds, the sound of the chirping burst into the house and spread a new spirit all around, the breath of spring, which although it tarried, speedily would come.[106]

The female narrator thus deftly entwines biblical, homiletic, secular, ethnographic and feminist narration, highlighting Deborah's prophetic voice in a form of narrative sisterhood, even as she makes clear her separate, retrospective narrative point of view.

The end of the story portrays the rebbetzin emulating the other women in town in hanging up an outdoor cheese-drying rack, a seemingly trivial domestic act that nevertheless comes to stand for maternal care and fidelity as well as social/textual transformation.[107] Earlier in the story, when the rebbetzin was still a stranger to the community, the rabbi showed his wife not just these cheese-drying shelves but also the other side of the wall in most houses, featuring a whole shelf of *tsedaqah* boxes for various yeshivot, linking women's domestic work with homespun charity. Sheila Jelen notes the appearance at this point of the story of a stranger—a roving photographer who documents the ways of the town and whose aims seem to dovetail with those of Baron, writing her shtetl stories from the alien ethnographic viewpoint of Tel Aviv. According to Jelen,

> Baron creates links between disparate times (pre- and post-Holocaust), disparate places (eastern Europe and Palestine), and disparate impulses (ethnographic and fictional) in her stories that introduce a photography motif, even as she emphasizes the impossibility of using transparently mimetic or realist premises to create historical meaning within a literary context.[108]

I will add to this the way in which Baron stitches together old texts, those from classical sources and her own prior work, creating seams between these materials but also transforming them and making clear along the way her narrative/authorial agency in these transformations.

With respect to the ending of the story, you will recall that in Baron's "Aḥot" the savior role is played by the elder sister, who suddenly steps in for her disempowered mother and picks up and consoles the fallen baby girl. In "Bereshit," while hanging the cheese rack, the mother accidentally awakens her daughter with the sound of a hammer but then rushes over in response to her cries to greet her first baby girl with a smile. There is no discussion anywhere in this story about the undesirability of a daughter or a sister. The narrator describes her mother's smile at her daughter as "the first thing that each of us children of the rabbi of Zhuzhikovka"—male and female alike—"saw the moment we emerged into the light of the day."[109] The chosen word for smile here is *bat-tseḥoq*, literally "daughter of laughter," an expression that lexically links daughterhood and, by extension, sisterhood, with joy, not tears. The ending of "Bereshit" thus explicitly picks up and re-embraces the aim and subject matter of the earlier 1910 work, countering with a feminine smile the tradition of devalued daughters and sisters and celebrating the *aḥot laʿet*, the sister-narrator of this story as a re-creator of Hebrew texts, thereby reimagining the idea of the Hebrew sister as if from the very beginning.

NOTES

1 Adapted from Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A New Translation with Commentary*, 3 vols. (Norton, 2019), 1:83.

2 Amy Kalmanofsky, *Dangerous Sisters of the Hebrew Bible* (Fortress, 2014), 8.

3 See, e.g., "Vatikhtov," Maharat's writing fellowship, at https://www.yeshivatmaharat.org/writingfellows2021.

4 Several scholars have identified occasions when Agnon and Baron seemed to have borrowed from and revised each other's work. Nurit Govrin, *Hamaḥatsit harishonah* (Mossad Bialik, 1988), 178, has suggested that Baron's early story "Hasavta Hanye" (1909) might have served as a template for Agnon's beloved novella "Tehillah," an idea that I explore in Wendy Zierler, "From Hanye to Tehilla," in *Agnon's Stories of the Land of Israel*, ed. Jeffrey Saks (Yeshiva University Press, 2021), 166–88. Marc Bernstein, "Midrash and Marginality: The 'Agunot' of S. Y. Agnon and Devorah Baron," *Hebrew Studies* 42 (2001): 7–58 has argued that Baron's story "ʿAgunah" (1920) responds directly, from a feminist perspective, to Agnon's signature story,

"ʿAgunot"; his essay is reprinted as "On the Story *ʿAgunah*,'" in *Hebrew, Gender and Modernity: Critical Responses to Dvora Baron's Fiction*, ed. Sheila Jelen and Shachar Pinsker (University of Maryland Press, 2007), 117–44. See also Wendy Zierler, *And Rachel Stole the Idols: The Emergence of Modern Hebrew Women's Writing* (Wayne State University Press, 2004), 192–201 and Zierler, "Breaking The Idyll: Rereading Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Agnon's *Sippur pashut* through Devorah Baron's *Fradl*," *Prooftexts* 37, no. 3 (2019): 607–41.

5 Endeavoring to account of for the male-centeredness of his analysis, Frederick E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 7 notes that "this is no modern imposition but an accurate reflection of virtually all of the biblical tales in which the theme appears. The few exceptions (Rachel and Leah or Michal and Merab) merely confirm the Bible's androcentric focus, for the narratives that do include females invariably function as adjuncts to those dealing with males in one way or another. Thus Rachel and Leah echo Jacob's relation with Esau, and Michal and Merab epitomize the conflict between David and Saul.

6 Henry Abramovitch, *Brothers and Sisters: Myth and Reality* (Texas A & M University Press, 2014), 73.

7 Abramovitch, *Brothers and Sisters*, 8.

8 For the traditional allegorical interpretation, see Song of Songs Rabbah, most famously.

9 For the complete *piyyut* see Project Ben-Yehudah, https://benyehuda.org/read/33286.

10 While the dedication of the poem refers to the biblical Dinah, the title plays off of Hosea 1:6, where God instructs the prophet to name his daughter "Lo-ruḥamah" ("unpitied," feminine).

11 For the complete poem, see Yehudah Leib Gordon "Aḥoti ruḥamah," Project Ben-Yehuda, https://benyehuda.org/read/6943.

12 David Biale, *Eros and the Jews* (University of California Press, 1997), 176–77.

13 I refer here to the emergence of Hebrew women's prose writings because it is around this time that we begin to see the publication of the first collections of Hebrew short fiction by women: Hava Shapiro's *Qovets tsiyyurim* appears in Warsaw in 1909, while Nehama Puhachewsky's *BiYhudah heḥadashah. Qovets tsiyyurim* appears in 1911.

14 Govrin, *Hamaḥatsit harishonah*, 25.

15 Dan Laor, *Ḥayyei ʿAgnon* (Schocken, 1998), 65. According to Ortsion Bartanah, "Gilgul nusḥaʾot besippur 'Aḥot' leShai ʿAgnon," *Gazit* 29, nos. 9–12 (Kislev–Adar 5733): 86, Agnon enjoyed an especially close relationship with his siblings; when he left Palestine for Germany, he brought his beloved sister Devorah to live near him in Berlin, a detail that might be seen as shedding retrospective light on the image of the sister in Agnon's "Aḥot."

16 For an analysis of several images of (exilic) sisters in the nationalist writing of several early twentieth-century writers, including Baron, see Orian Zakai, "Zion of Their Own: Hebrew Women's Nationalist Writing" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2012).

17 The first edition was published in Berlin by Jüdischer Verlag in 1922. The subsequent version of the story that was included in vol. 4 of *Kol sippurav shel Shmuʾel Yosef ʿAgnon*, (Schocken, 1931) (and in later editions, vol. 3) is very similar to the 1922 version, with the exception of the absence of chapter divisions and changes in line breaks, as well as some significant changes to the ending, which we will discuss below. All references to that later version will be to S. Y. Agnon, "Aḥot," in *Kol sippurav shel Shmuʾel Yosef ʿAgnon*, 8 vols. (Schocken, 1959), 3:404–7, unless otherwise noted.

18 For the text of Halevi's poem with commentary, see Yehuda Halevi, "Mi khamokha veʾein kamokha," National Library of Israel, https://www.nli.org.il/he/piyut/Piyut1song_010046700000005171/NLI.

19 Ziva Shamir, "'Vahayi li eim veʾaḥot.' ʿIyyun besippuro hamuqdam shel ʿAgnon, 'Aḥot,'" in *Hanitsanim nirʾu baʾarets. Sippurav hamuqdamim shel Shai ʿAgnon*, 28, https://www.zivashamir.com/post/והיי-לי-אם-ואחות.

20 In the original 1910 version of the story, the fact that Naʿaman is also given the first name Netaʿ ("plant") is rendered ironic by the fact that he spends his days, laboring not on the land, but in an office, like the young Agnon himself in those early days in Jaffa.

21 Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon, "Aḥot," in *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul* (Jüdischer Verlage, 1922), ה׳ and ו׳.

22 Agnon, "Aḥot," in *Kol sippurav*, 3:404.

23 *Yevarekhekha adonai miTsiyyon urʾeh betuv Yerushalayim kol yemei ḥayyekha*, "May the LORD bless you from Zion; and **may you see Jerusalem's good** all the days of thy life." (Alter, *Hebrew Bible*, 3:301.)

24 *Haven yaqqir li Efrayim im yeled shaʿashuʿim ki middei dabbri bo zakhor ezkerennu ʿod ʿal ken hamu meʿay lo raḥem araḥamennu neʾum Adonai*, "Is Ephraim not a dear son to Me, a delightful child? **For even as I speak** against him, I surely recall him. Therefore does My heart stir for him, I will surely show him mercy, says the Lord" (Alter, *Hebrew Bible*, 2:965).

25 *Semoʾlo taḥat leroʾshi, viymino teḥabbeqeini*, "His **left hand** beneath my head, **his right hand** embracing me." (Alter, *Hebrew Bible*, 3:592).

26 *Vehu keḥatan, yotse meḥupato; yasis kegibbor, laruts oraḥ*, "And he like a groom from his canopy comes, exults **like a warrior running his course**." (Alter, *Hebrew Bible*, 2:61).

27 Agnon, "Aḥot," in *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul*, ו. The 1931 edition and other subsequent versions omit the allusion to Isaiah.

28 Chaya Shacham, "Hamarbeh betserufim yeduʿim. Iyyun baʾaspeqt haʾaluzioni shel hasippur 'Aot' leShai ʿAgnon," *Dappim lemeḥqar hasifrut* 2 (1985): 207–22.

29 Shacham, "Hamarbeh," 214.

30 The name Tirtza evokes Song of Songs 6:4 (*yafah at raʿyati keTirtsah*) and later becomes the name of the protagonist/narrator of Agnon's *Bidmi yameha*, which revisits some of the themes of his "Aḥot," as the latter part of this article shows. "Eleaonora" is the title of a story by Edgar Allen Poe and the name of the departed cousin/beloved of the story's protagonist.

31 Agnon, *Kol sippurav* 3:405.

32 Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon, "Aḥot," *Hapoʿel hatsaʿir* 1–2 (November 11, 1910), 13.

33 For sinners and distractions of the flesh, see Ziva Shamir, 4/9 notes the likely influence on Agnon's "Aḥot" of a story written in 1906 by the older Buczacz-born writer Yitshak Farnhof. That story, titled "Shetei nashim" ("Two Wives"), is a misogynistic modern adaptation of the story of Lamech, which attributes the murder that he committed to the squabbling and bad influence of his wives. Farnhof was an early mentor of Agnon. For Farnhof's story, see Yitshak Farnhof, "Shetei Nashim," Ben-Yehuda.org, https://benyehuda.org/read/21239.

34 Ziva Shamir, 3/9 also sees this as an allusion to Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik's satirical poem "Minhag ḥadash," which describes the degenerate sexual norms in those days in Palestine, as two men walk with their arms around one woman, and other men speak noncommittally of their partners: *etmol Ḥannah, maḥar Peninnah* ("yesterday

Hannah, tomorrow Peninnah"). For the text of Bialik's poem, see https://benyehuda.org/read/6115. For references to Hannah and Peninnah, see Agnon, *Kol sippurav*, 405. Tsahi Weiss, "'MiNaʿamah leNaʿaman.' Gilguleihem shel sheloshah mitosim miqraʾim el sifrut yehudit bezemaneinu," *Shai leYosef* (Hebrew University Press, 2003), 181–88 explains this addition of Hannah and Peninnah in relation to midrashic and kabbalistic sources that view Elkanah (1 Samuel 1:1–2:21) as a reincarnation of Lamech (Genesis 4:18–24), and Peninnah and Hannah as reincarnations of Adah and Zillah, respectively. Weiss also sees the name Naʿaman as related to the midrashic/mystical demonic figure of Naʿamah.

35 Alan M. Mintz, "Agnon in Jaffa: The Myth of the Artist as a Young Man," *Prooftexts* 1, no. 1 (1981): 67.

36 "Aḥot" (1922), ח׳.

37 Notably, Naʿaman's home is referred to in all versions of the story as "beit avv," his father's home, even though no father figure appears anywhere in the story. As in many of Agnon's later stories, the reference to a missing or abandoned father hints at the protaogonist's estrangement from the heavenly Father and from religious faith. For the lost prior self, see Ziva Shamir, 6/8, who sees this amalgam of mother and sister as evoking the second line of Bialik's poem "Hakhnisini taḥat kenafekh" ("Take Me under Your Wing," 1905), in which the poet requests of his female addressee, "vahayi li em veʾaḥot" ("and be my mother and sister"). This connection, in her view, indicates that the sister in Agnon's story is not so much a flesh-and-blood sibling but a symbol of connectedness to his religious past and of self-restraint in the face of the moral and sexual nihilism of the Zionist *ḥalutsim*.

38 Juliet Mitchell, *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (Blackwell, 2003), 35.

39 Agnon will return repeatedly to this maternal image of the mother sitting by the window, most famously in his childhood story "Hamitpaḥat" ("The Kerchief"), in *Kol sippurav shel Shmuʾel Yosefʿ Agnon*, 8 vols. (Schocken, 1959): 2:256–66.

40 Nehama Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape* (Wayne State University Press, 1998) 14, 16.

41 Kalmanofsky, *Dangerous Sisters*, 47.

42 Michal Arbell, *Katuvʿalʿoro shel hakelev* (Keter, 2006), 12.

43 Abramovitch, *Brothers and Sisters*, 8.

44 Sander Gilman, "Sibling Incest, Madness, and the 'Jews,'" *Social Research* 65, no. 2 (1998): 403–4.

45 On the centrality of sexuality to the human psyche, see Arbell, *Katuv*, 151.

46 Agnon, "Aḥot," in *Kol sippurav*, 4:333.

47 Agnon, "Aḥot," in *Kol Sippurav*, 3:406.

48 Agnon seems to have gone back and forth on how erotic to make this climactic kiss. In the original 1910 version, it is a kiss on the hand; in the 1922 version, he lowers his sister's hand and places his burning mouth upon her, giving her a long kiss in silence, by implication a kiss on the mouth. In *Kol Sippurav* (Agnon, "Aḥot," in *Kol sippurav*, 3:407.) there is no discussion of dropping or lowering her hand, only that he bent and placed his mouth "ʿaleha," which means either on her (feminine gender) hand or her mouth.

49 For more on the Weinberg, the letter, and this time period in Baron's biography, see Govrin, *Hamaḥatsit harishonah*, 94–102. For an even earlier use of the sister as sister-writer, see Leopold Winkler's tribute poem to the first modern Hebrew woman poet, Rachel Morpurgo, "Tehilah leRaḥel," which opens with the words "Aḥot lanu qetanah" (an allusion to Song of Songs 8:8), *Kokhvei Yitsḥaq* 24 (1858): 92–93.

50 "Iggerot Y. H. Brenner," Project Ben-Yehuda, https://benyehuda.org/read/11448. They are also reprinted in Govrin, *Hamaḥatsit harishonah*, 102–3.

51 For more on this, see Carole B. Balin, "The Makings of a Maskilah," in *To Reveal Our Hearts* (HUC Press, 2000), 13–50.

52 Devorah Baron, "Aḥot," in *Parshiyot muqdamot*, ed. Nurit Govrin and Avner Holtzman (Mossad Bialik, 1988), 511. Translation from Dvora Baron, *The First Day and Other Stories,* trans. Chana Kronfeld and Naomi Seidman (University of California Press, 2001), 137.

53 Translation adapted from Baron, *First Day*, 137. The original Hebrew reads "Et qolah lo herimah" which can be understood as referring either to a singing or a loud speaking voice; see Baron, "Aḥot," 511.

54 As Judith Pildes, "Mothers and Daughters: Understanding the Roles," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 3, no. 2 (1978), 5 observes about the deficient role training often imparted by mothers to daughters: "We learn how to be women from our mothers. . . . But we say our mothers never seem to tell us what we really want to know; they rarely tell us the actual details of their (and our) bodies' development, sexuality, schooling, pregnancy and childbirth, marriage and motherhood, seeking and holding jobs, relations with other women, or with men. We say that they do not talk to us about the world, or tell us how to make our lives."

55 "He had two such bookcases in his house, each of them with more than a few shelves, and the Hebrew books on them were as numerous as the white strands on his beard—but who would pore over them when he was gone? He had no son." (Baron, *First Day*, 138–39).]

56 The narrator's willingness to quote this holy epithet (*adonai tseva'ot*) in its original form, without replacing any letters, provides a subtle hint that, now an adult, she has already departed from her family's pious ways, having stepped into the arena of secular Hebrew writing.

57 "The first known synagogue-based coming of age ceremony for Jewish girls was held at the Beer Temple in Berlin [a Reformed Temple] in 1817. In 1847, Rabbi Adolf Jellinek used a German version of the term *bat mitzvah* to refer to the girls celebrating a similar ceremony in Leipzig. Such celebrations were not the practice among 19th and early 20th century Eastern European Jews." See Michael Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History* (Jewish Publication Society, 2014), 106–34.

58 See b. Bava Qamma 97:4, where R. Ḥanina is quoted as teaching that a greater reward accrues to those who perform a mitzvah they are commanded to perform than those who do so without having been commanded.

59 Baron, *First Day*, 143.

60 Govrin, *Hamaḥatsit harishonah*, 194.

61 Baron, "Aḥot," 509.

62 Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1989), 45.

63 Baron, "Aḥot," 509 and Baron, *First Day*, 145.

64 Baron, *First Day*, 146.

65 Baron, "Aḥot," 508.

66 Shmu'el Yosef Agnon, *Bidmi yameha*, *Hatequfah* 17 (1923), 77–124.

67 For a useful summary of the variety of critical approaches to the story, see Ruth Ginsburg, "Bidmi yameha metah Tirtzsa, o, 'Yafah at ra'aati keTirtsah na'vah kiYrushalyim, ayumah kanigdalot,'" *Dappim lemeḥqar besifrut* 8 (1991–92): 285–300.

68 On the triangulated love patterns, see Yael Halevi-Wise, "Reading Agnon's 'In the Prime of Life in Light of Freud's 'Dora,'" *Jewish Quarterly Review* 98, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 29–40 and Halevi-Wise, "The 'Double Triangle' Paradigm: National

Redemption in Bi-generational Love Triangles from Agnon to Oz," *Prooftexts* 26 (2006): 309–43

69 Amos Oz, *Matḥilim sippur* (Keter, 1996), 23.

70 Eddy Tsemaḥ, "Bekefel hademut," *Qeriyah tamah* (Mossad Bialik, 1990), 11–24.

71 Ilana Pardes, "Lilqot bisdot zarim. ʿAgnon, Rut veshe'eilat hazarut," *Hasifrut haʿIvrit kegibborat hatarbut. Sefer kenes likhvod Professor Nitza Ben-Dov*, ed. Or Scharff (Schocken, 2021), 154. An abbreviated English-language version of this can be found in Ilana Pardes, *Ruth: A Migrant's Tale* (Yale University Press, 2022), 124–29.

72 Nitza Ben-Dov, "Kalu zikhronot Tirtsa," in *Vehi tehilatekha* (Schocken, 2006), 69–70.

73 See Song of Songs 1:7: *Shallamah ehyeh keʿotyah, ʿal edrei ḥaverekha*.

74 See the biblical Jacob's description of his life to Pharaoh in Genesis 47:9: *meʿat veraʿim hayu yemei shenei ḥayyai velo hassigu et yemei shenei ḥayyei avotay biy'mei megureihem*.

75 Shmu'el Yosef Agnon, *In The Prime of Her Life*, trans. Gabriel Levin, in *Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town and Other Novellas* (Toby, 2014), 165.

76 Pardes, *Ruth*, 126 sees this effort to fuse with her mother as an echo of the biblical Ruth and her famous declaration of allegiance to Naomi's people, place, and God in Ruth 1:16–17.

77 *Bidmi yameha*, *Kol sippurav*, 3:6 and Agnon, *In the Prime*, 191.

78 Agnon, *Bidmi yameha*, 407.

79 Agnon, *In The Prime*, 219.

80 Agnon, *In The Prime*, 220.

81 Pardes, *Ruth*, 126–27. In her discussion of the ways in which Agnon's *Bidmi yameha* recalls and revises the pastoralism of the biblical book of Ruth, Pardes also notes the ways in which Agnon's novella builds on some of the other (incestuous) familial themes of the book. According to Pardes, "Tirtza would have liked, as it were, to be like Ruth, whose son, Obed, is placed at Naomi's bosom. But Tirtza's mother is dead, and the incestuous dimension of her cravings now looms large and weighs upon her in ways she finds difficult to bear" (127).

82 Arbell, *Katuv*, 41–42.

83 Arbell, *Katuv*, 46.

84 Naomi B. Sokoloff, "Narrative Ventriloquism and Muted Feminine Voice: Agnon's 'In the Prime of Her Life,'" *Prooftexts* 9, no. 2 (1989): 115.

85 Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon, "The Tale of the Scribe," in *A Book that Was Lost and Other Stories*, ed. Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman (Toby, 1995), 183.

86 Arnold Band, "Hamesapper habilti meheiman be*Mikhael sheli* uve*Bidmi yameha*," *Hasifrut* 3, no. 1 (1971), 327.

87 Pardes, *Ruth*, 124.

88 A. B. Yehoshua, *Koḥah hanora shel oshmah qetanah* (Yediʿot aḥronot, 1998), 142–64. Eddy Tsemaḥ, "Bekhefel demut," in *Qeriʾah tamah* (Mossad Bialik, 1990), 23 makes a similar point, arguing that Mintz may not have intended to give his daughter to Mazal, but that, subconsciously, that is what he did.

89 Nitza Ben-Dov, "The Old Woman," *Agnon's Art of Indirection* (Brill, 1993), 107–34.

90 Sokoloff, "Narrative Ventriloquism," 128–29.

91 Nitza Ben-Dov, "Kalu zikhronot Tirtsa," *Vehi tehilatekha* (Schocken, 2006), 53.

92 Ziva Shamir, "Ki nehefakh haʿelem leʾish aḥer. Hasippur *Bidmi yameha* betorat allegoriyah leʾumit," in *Shaiʿolamot. Ribbui panim biytsirat ʿAgnon* (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2011), 69–88.

93 For an earlier discussion of these stories in light of the theme of the birth of the daughter, see Wendy Zierler, "Staring at the Bookcase: Daughters, Knowledge, and the Fiction of Devorah Baron," in *Hebrew, Gender and Modernity: Critical Responses to Dvora Baron's Fiction*, ed. Sheila Jelen and Shachar Pinsker (University Press of Maryland Press, 2007), 69–89.

94 Devorah Baron, "Genizah," part 1, *Haḥaver*, 95 (12 Iyyar 5668 /May 13, 1908): 2–3; part 2, *Haḥaver*, 96 (13 Iyyar 5668 / May 14, 1908): 2–3; part 3, *Haḥaver*, 97 (14 Iyyar 5668/May 15, 1908): 2–3. The poem is also available through Project Ben-Yehuda, https://benyehuda.org/read/25297.

95 Devorah Baron, "Hayom harishon," in *Parshiyot* (Mossad Bialik, 1968), 249 and Baron, *First Day*, 21.

96 When the narrator's mother finds herself at a loss for how to respond to her mean-spirited mother-in-law, the narrator, who manages to straddle the boundary of masculine and feminine knowledges, notes that "it would have been enough for her to bring up the day her first daughter was born, when her husband, the rabbi, reading aloud from the letter he had written to her father, explained to her explicitly that what was meant by the verse, 'And God blessed Abraham in everything [*bakkol*]' was no less than that God had given him a daughter whose

name was 'Everything' [*Bakkol*]" ("Hayom harishon," *Parshiyot*, 249 / "The First Day," in *First Day*, 21–22.

97 As Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (University of California Press, 2021), 78 observes, "if the practice of writing from the perspective of a young shtetl girl contributed to the perception of her work as thinly veiled autobiography or naive children's literature, then 'The First Day' subjects this perception to a reduction *ad absurdum*. Baron's first person chronicle of the day old baby girl cannot be ascribed to memory; nor could the experiences related here have come from family stories. . . . Among the effects of such scenes is to expose the fictionality of memoiristic conventions."

98 Devorah Baron, "Hayom harishon," *Parshiyot* (Mossad Bialik, 1968), 246 and *First Day*, 18.

99 Baron, *Parshiyot*, 225 and Baron, *First Day*, 4. See also Seidman, *Marriage*, 45–46.

100 Baron, *Parshiyot*, 226 and Baron, *First Day*, 4.

101 One might add to this list of associations the halakhic discussions about the permissibility of mending a garment ritually torn as a sign of mourning; see Shulhan Arukh, *Yoreh De'ah* 340:16. See also Genesis Rabbah 39:3, where Bar Kappara reads the use of the word "aḥot" from Song of Songs 8:8 as *shehu me'aḥeh et haqqera'*, referring to one who repairs a tear in a garment.

102 Baron, *Parshiyot*, 230.

103 Baron, *Parshiyot*, 231.

104 Baron, *Parshiyot*, 233 and Baron, *First Day*, 12.

105 Baron, *Parshiyot*, 237 and Baron, *First Day*, 5.

106 Baron, *First Day*, 14.

107 The symbolic importance of this domestic task in the context of the story relates to what Allison Schachter, "Dvora Baron's Aesthetic Labor," in *Women Writing Jewish Modernity 1919–1939* (Northwestern University Press, 2022), 55–78 describes as Baron's commitment to "aesthetic labor."

108 Shela Jelen, *Intimations of Difference* (Syracuse University Press, 2007), 53.

109 Baron, *Parshiyot*, 235 and Baron, *First Day*, 15. At fifteen she had left home first for Minsk and then Kovno, and she lives for a time with her beloved brother Benjamin, eventually leaving him behind, too, in order to go to Palestine.