

## Midrash Agnon with Jeffrey Saks

Start each week with a bit of Agnon! Join Jeffrey Saks for a Sunday morning study session of the Nobel laureate's writing—reading in English translation as our instructor helps build a bridge to the original Hebrew texts and the rich rabbinic sources from which Agnon crafted his modern writing.



In S.Y. Agnon's stories we encounter the Jewish world in transition between the past and the present, tradition and modernity, and the Diaspora and *Eretz Yisrael*. What do his stories mean for today's readers and contemporary Jewish history? Each session explores a different short story from the anthology "A Book That Was Lost" (Toby Press).

**5 Sundays in a row May 17 – June 14, 2026 at 11:00am**

This series talks place live at Agnon House, 16 Klausner Street, Jerusalem (*no Zoom broadcast*).

**Rabbi Jeffrey Saks** is director of research at Jerusalem's Agnon House.

Details and registration at: <https://agnonhouse.org.il/event/midrash-agnon-with-jeffrey-saks>

### Syllabus

#### May 17: "The Sign"

Agnon's most direct engagement with the Holocaust and the destruction of his hometown Buczacz is embedded in a powerful and mystical tale for the holiday of Shavuot, celebrated later this week. The story serves as the initiation event through which the author comes to terms with his task as the chronicler of an annihilated Jewish civilization.

*In the year when the news reached us that all the Jews in my town had been killed, I was living in a certain section of Jerusalem, in a house I had built for myself after the disturbances of 1929. On the night when the Arabs destroyed my home, I vowed that if God would save me from the hands of the enemy and I should live, I would build a house in this particular neighborhood which the Arabs had tried to destroy. By the grace of God, I was saved from the hands of our despoilers and my wife and children and I remained alive in Jerusalem. Thus I fulfilled my vow and there built a house and made a garden. I planted a tree, and lived in that place with my wife and children, by the will of our Rock and Creator.*

#### May 24: "Two Pairs"

A nostalgic recollection of the narrator's bar mitzvah contains hints to the author's biography—his religious upbringing, his abandonment of traditional observance, and his return to pious practice as he returns to the Land of Israel in midlife. Here the visceral nature of the Jew binding tefillin on hand and head makes the performance of the ritual a symbol for a life of traditional observance, evoking the yoking of oneself to the divine command—how the Jew is tethered to it while often struggling to untie its cords.

*Much time has passed since my bar mitzvah, and I've traveled far since I first wore my tefillin. Many times, exhausted by the ravages of life, I was too rushed for deep prayer so I would put on my tefillin for a brief prayer. On my head the tefillah was like a tired bird wanting to perch quietly but who is forced to move by arrows that are aimed at it.*

#### May 31: "The Sense of Smell"

This story is one of Agnon's most self-reflective on his own writerly craft and the meaning of reawakening (what some called reviving) the Hebrew language as a tool for modern literary expression. First published in 1937, it presages themes he would explore three decades later upon accepting the Nobel Prize, which was understood as much as an award for modern Hebrew and the nation who had returned to its native Holy Tongue.

*For love of our language and affection for the holy, I darken my countenance with constant study of Torah and starve myself over the words of our sages. These I store up in my belly so that they together will be present to my lips. If the Temple were still standing, I would be up there on the platform among my singing brothers, reciting each day the song that the Levites sang in the Temple. But since the Temple remains destroyed and we have no priests at service or Levites at song, instead I study Torah, the Prophets and the Writings, Mishnah, laws and legends, supplementary treatises and fine points of Torah and the works of the scribes. When I look at their words and see that of all the delights we possessed in ancient times there remains only this memory, my heart fills up with grief. That grief makes my heart tremble, and it is out of that trembling that I write stories, like one exiled from his father's palace who makes himself a little hut and sits there telling of the glory of his father's house.*

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**June 7: "First Kiss"**

An enigmatic and mystical tale about the confrontation between traditional Jewish society and the outside world, here represented by Christianity. Through the symbols of the Kabbalah the story considers a world where barriers between tradition and modernity break down, what becomes of one who steps too far outside, and what are the prospects for the return of the wayward?

*My heart thundered and my mouth fastened to hers, and her mouth to mine. And the purest sweetness flowed from her mouth to mine and—it is possible—from my mouth to hers. We call this in Hebrew "the kiss of the mouth," and it must be the same in other languages too. I should say here that this was the first time I ever kissed a young girl, and it seems almost certain to me that it was her first kiss as well: a kiss of innocence that carries with it no pain, but goodness and blessing, life, grace, and kindness, whereby a man and a woman live together till calm old age.*

**June 14: "A Whole Loaf"**

In this, one of the most characteristic of Agnon's surreal, nightmarish stories, we encounter the narrating author as the dramatized ego struggling against the unfinished task. Not for nothing was Agnon compared to Kafka because of this story—but such comparison (at which Agnon bristled) misses the point as evidenced by the unraveling of the story's many spiritual symbols.

*It is easy to understand the state of a man who has two courses in front of him: if he takes one, it seems to him that he has to follow the other; and if he takes the other, it seems to him that he ought to go along the first one. At length he takes the course that he ought to take. Now that I was going to the post office, I wondered that I could possibly have had any doubt for a while and wished to give my own trifling affairs precedence over other affairs. And within a short while I found myself standing at the post office.*