

Midrash Agnon with Jeffrey Saks

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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? In this series we will focus on a trio of stories of the old hometown of Buczacz exploring the maxim that "You can't go home again." The stories all appear in the anthology [A Book That Was Lost](#) (Toby Press), available through the publisher, at Agnon House, or fine booksellers in Jerusalem.

4 Sundays in a row in July 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/english-events>

Syllabus

July 5: Fable of the Goat (pp. 199–202)

In one of Agnon's most beloved and widely-read stories, we encounter the poles of Jewish existence in the tension between the "Old World" and the promise of a rebirth in the Land of Israel. What appears as a pious retelling of an old Hasidic tale or piece of folklore is in fact a profoundly modern statement about the condition of the Jewish people with the rise of political Zionism.

When they emerged from the cave, the youth saw lofty mountains, and waters that flowed down from the mountains; and the wind wafted all manner of perfumes. The goat climbed up a tree by clutching at the ribbed leaves. Carob fruits full of honey dropped from the tree, and she ate of the carobs and drank of the garden's fountain. The youth stood and called to the wayfarers: "I adjure you, good people, tell me where I am, and what is the name of this place?" They answered him, "You are in the Land of Israel, and you are close by Safed."

July 12: Tale of the Menorah (pp. 241–254)

In Agnon's stories of his hometown of Buczacz he sets out to relate the history—real and imagined—of many centuries of Jewish life. In this tale he weaves folklore, imagination, history, and his intertextual midrashic-like matrix of sources to explore 300 years of the fraught Jewish-Gentile relations in the region through the prism of one ritual object.

So the menorah stood there, and so it shone for the entire time this house of God was indeed a house for God, until the day Israel was driven out by Chmielnicki and the town's Gentiles made the house of God into a church for their gods. Then the Gentile who watched the candles, who was a millworker, took the menorah and hid it in the River Strypa, which was near the mill. The menorah lay at the bottom of the Strypa's waters, and no one knew where it was.

July 19: The Kerchief (pp. 61–73)

As we mark the week of Tisha B'Av (Agnon's 138th birthday) we'll consider the centrality of that tragic day in Agnon's writings, and in this tale of the youth in Buczacz as he prepares for bar mitzvah and the responsibilities of talking his place as an agent of redemption.

Suddenly I stopped at Mother's window, the one from which she used to look out. The place was strange; the sun's light upon it did not dazzle but warmed, and there was perfect rest there. Suddenly I felt that I had not treated her properly; she had had a fine kerchief which she used to bind around her head on Sabbaths and festivals, and I had taken it and given it to a beggar to bind up his feet with. Ere I had ended asking her to forgive me she was gazing at me with love and affection. I gazed back at her, and my heart was filled with the same gladness as I had felt on that Sabbath when my mother had set the kerchief about her head for the first time.

July 26: Visit to the Agnon Archives at the National Library of Israel

Space limited – Advance registration required!

Details and cost TBA