LESSON PLANS

for

A BOOK THAT WAS LOST
AND OTHER STORIES

by S.Y. AGNON
Dear One People, One Book Participant:

Our tradition teaches that when even two people gather to study holy words, the presence of God dwells with them. We are pleased that so many of us will, over the course of the year, gather together to study words and ideas, learning from and with each other and our shared tradition.

As we mark the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of medinat Yisrael (the state of Israel), we are honored to read A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories, a collection of stories by S. Y. Agnon, the acclaimed genius of modern Hebrew literature and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Agnon is a masterful maggid—a classic storyteller who weaves together Biblical and rabbinic sources, colorful images of the "old country," and vivid insights on daily life in Israel.

The One People One Book series is designed for a variety of educational settings, including formal presentations; discussions in classes, book clubs and havurot; and traditional havruta (partnered) learning. To assist students and teachers, the Board of Rabbis has developed this set of self-contained lesson plans on selected stories from A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories.

We hope that this collection will guide teachers and their students in understanding and appreciating the literary mastery of Shai Agnon. Rabbis Daniel Bouskila, Miriyam Glazer and Shawn Fields-Meyer, and rabbinical student Neil Blumofe, have prepared lesson plans on nine stories covering key aspects of Agnon’s work and thought. To assist students and teachers, the Board of Rabbis has developed a companion booklet, "An Agnon Sourcebook," with essays, a brief biography, Agnon’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech, articles and a bibliography. We encourage you to download this important resource from the Board of Rabbis web site, www.boardofrabbis.org/one-people-one-book.

We would be remiss if we failed to note that reading any text in translation is a worthy endeavor, but cannot capture the full flavor of the original. If you are interested in finding out how to obtain Hebrew versions of the works of S.Y. Agnon, please contact your synagogue or the Board of Rabbis (323-761-8600, boardofrabbis@jewishla.org).

Rabbis Miriyam Glazer and Daniel Bouskila serve as the 2007-08 co-chairs of the One People, One Book program and we are indebted to them for their devoted leadership. We thank as well committee members Rabbi Shawn Fields-Meyer and Rabbi Michelle Missaghieh. We also express our deep appreciation to Jonathan Freund, Board of Rabbis Program Director, and Cookie Olshein, Board of Rabbis rabbinic intern, for their invaluable contributions to One People, One Book.

We are delighted that you have decided to join us on this journey of learning. Now, in the words of the great sage Rabbi Hillel: The rest is commentary. Go and learn!

L’shalom,

Rabbi Mark S. Diamond
Executive Vice President

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How to Use these Lesson Plans

These lesson plans cover the following nine stories from A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories by S.Y. Agnon.

- Agunot
- The Kerchief
- A Book That Was Lost
- The Sense of Smell
- From Lodging to Lodging
- The Tale of the Scribe
- The Fable of the Goat
- The Tale of the Menorah
- At the Outset of the Day

Note that all page numbers and translations used within these plans come from the 1995 Shocken Edition, edited by Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman.

These lessons are designed to be used by a teacher or group facilitator in preparing a class or group study session. They may also be used by small groups without a leader, such as hevrutot, or others.

While most of the lesson plans contain a summary of the story they focus on, these plans are not intended to substitute for a close reading of the story itself. They are designed to help a teacher stimulate discussion that fosters understanding and appreciation for Agnon's timeless and intricate themes relating to Judaism, the Jewish people, and Israel.

For essays and additional material on Agnon and his work, please see the Board of Rabbis of Southern California’s "An Agnon Sourcebook," also available for download from our website at boardofrabbis/one-people-one-book

Edited by
Jonathan Freund
with Cookie Lea Olshein
SUMMARY & BACKGROUND

The opening section of the story "Agunot" is written in classic Midrashic style, and serves as a symbolic and metaphorical introduction to the plot that ensues. We are told that "A thread of grace is spun and drawn out of the deeds of Israel, and the Holy One, blessed be He, in His glory, sits and weaves – strand on strand – a tallit all grace and all mercy, for the Congregation Israel to deck herself in." God weaves a prayer shawl whose threads and materials are composed of the "deeds of Israel," and this prayer shawl is used to wrap the "Congregation Israel" (The Jewish People) within it. If the "deeds of Israel" are "neither sullied nor stained," then the tallit will indeed be one of "all grace and all mercy." But if something goes wrong with the "deeds of Israel," that is, if something disturbs the "grace" and "snaps a thread in the loom," then the prayer shawl is damaged, and can even be torn into shreds.

As the midrashic opening comes to a close, the "deeds of Israel" are framed in terms of love. From deeds of wholesome and fulfilled love, God weaves a tallit that is "all grace and all mercy." But should something in love go wrong, creating a situation where one is "afflicted with love," then, indeed, "this affliction of love leads to the darkest melancholy," snapping a thread and hence damaging the tallit.

This metaphor is creatively positioned as the introduction to Agnon's "signature story," the story from which, in 1908 in Palestine, the young Shmuel Yosef Czazkes took his pen name "Agnon." For as its title indicates, this is indeed a story about "Agunot," except Agnon has transformed a legal term (Agunah) from Jewish Law into an emotional state of being. In Jewish Law, an "Agunah" is a married woman whose husband is missing (either in war or other situations of distance where he may be presumed to be dead). With his whereabouts not known, the woman becomes legally "anchored" (the term "Agunah" comes from the Hebrew word "Ogen," which means "anchor"). She cannot be re-married until she is granted a divorce by her husband, yet he is not here to grant her that divorce. This means that the Agunah is in a state of limbo; she is an indeterminate figure, stuck between two worlds.

In this story, Agnon transforms the legal Agunah into an emotional Agunah, depicting multiple examples of disembodied souls doomed to be tragically anchored to that which they desire but apparently cannot obtain.

The actual plot, set in the "Holy Land," tells the story of a wealthy man, Sire Ahiezer, who comes to Jerusalem to help rebuild the city. Ahiezer had only one daughter, Dina, and when it came time to marry her off, Ahiezer slights the reputation of Jerusalem by arranging a match with Ezekiel, a brilliant young Talmudic scholar from Poland. To honor his future son-in-law, Ahiezer set out to build an academy where Ezekiel could teach, and next to it a synagogue where he could pray. For the special task of building a splendid Torah ark for the synagogue, Ahiezer hires the gifted craftsman Ben-Uri.

Ben-Uri is a devoted artist, and he devotes all of his energies towards his sacred/artistic task of building the Torah ark. While working on the ark, Ben-Uri begins to sing, and Dina, Ezekiel's intended, is attracted to him. But Ben-Uri ignores Dina, instead devoting all of his attention and passion to his work of art.
Ben-Uri completes the ark, setting it by a window. While Ben-Uri sleeps in a garden at night, Dina is curious as to why she no longer hears Ben-Uri’s singing. Dressed in her nightgown, she enters his workroom, only to discover the completed ark situated by the window. While studying the intricate beauty and detail in the ark in which Ben-Uri had invested his soul, Dina is overtaken by a sudden devilish compulsion, and in a fit of jealous rage, she pushes the ark through the window. Upon discovering the ark in the morning, the enraged men of the community accuse Ben-Uri, and the rabbi orders the desecrated ark be placed in the woodshed, replacing it with a much simpler ark. Ben-Uri disappears from Jerusalem.

In the meanwhile, Ezekiel arrives to Jerusalem, and he exceeds all expectations. He was a handsome, brilliant and accomplished Talmudist. Feeling overwhelmed with guilt before her arranged marriage to Ezekiel, Dina confesses to the rabbi that it was she who destroyed Ben-Uri’s ark. The rabbi’s response is that her sin was an accident, and that Ben-Uri’s ark should now be placed in Ezekiel’s synagogue. Yet Ben-Uri’s ark mysteriously disappeared, never to be found again.

Though the marriage between Ezekiel and Dina was performed as planned, it was never consummated; the two sat in opposite corners of their bedroom, dreaming of different worlds. Dina dreamed of Ben-Uri and his ark, both now mysteriously gone from Jerusalem. Ezekiel thinks of Freidele, the servant girl who managed his father’s household after his mother’s death. Ezekiel also thinks of the great Talmudic academies of Poland, for he was never quite able to spiritually adjust to Jerusalem. Having failed in both his marriage and in his teaching of Torah, Ezekiel divorces Dina and leaves Jerusalem to return to Poland. After closing both the academy and the synagogue, Ahiezer leaves with his daughter Dina.

On the same night that Ezekiel and Dina are divorced, the rabbi of Jerusalem, the same rabbi to whom Dina confessed before her wedding, and the same rabbi who performed both the wedding ceremony and the divorce proceedings between Ezekiel and Dina, has a terrifying dream. The holy spirit of God stood before him dressed like a woman in mourning, “nodding mournfully at him.” In contemplating the meaning of his dream, the rabbi receives Divine Providence, and "he beheld with eyes of spirit the souls of those bereaved of their beloved in their lifetime groping dismally in the world for their mates." Amongst these souls, the rabbi suddenly sees Ben-Uri, who berates the rabbi for exiling him from Jerusalem. The rabbi packs a bag and tells his wife "My daughter, seek not after me in my going forth, for the doom of exile has been levied upon me, to redeem the forsaken in love (L'taken Agunot)." The rabbi leaves Jerusalem and never returns.

The story concludes on a mystical note, speculating as to the whereabouts of the rabbi, and "of his sojourn in the world of confusion." There are "sightings" of the rabbi all over the world, and little children claim to see him in the Holy Land, "peering into their eyes." But nobody really knows where the rabbi is; this mysterious secret is kept by God.

SUGGESTED THEMES

Disharmonious relationships. This is the main theme of the story, borne out of mismatched people or circumstances. In this story we find:

- **Disharmony between couples** resulting from arranged marriages (Ezekiel and Dina).
- **Longing for a loved one** while in a forced relationship (Ezekiel longs for Freidele, and also longs for the Talmudic academies of Poland; Dina longs for Ben-Uri).
The tension between art and life (Dina obsesses over Ben-Uri, while Ben-Uri obsesses over his art).

The Symbolism of Names. The very names used in the story are symbolic of the plight of the characters:

- **Ben-Uri**: from the Biblical Bezalzel Ben-Uri, the artist/architect of God's Tabernacle.
- **Ezekiel**: from the Biblical Ezekiel, the prophet of the exile.
- **Dina**: from the Biblical Dina, a woman whose sole identity is that of a raped woman.
- **Freidele**: the archetype of the exile, hence her Yiddish name.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the symbolism of Shmuel Yosef Czaskes changing his name to "Agnon."
   - Is this story a commentary on his own life, and an expression of his identity?
   - Was he an "Agnonic Agunah" throughout his life, both in terms of his relationship with his wife, as well as with his relationship to life in Israel?
   - Was he "trapped between different worlds, belonging to neither"?

2. From all of the characters who are "Agunot" of one type or another in the story, only one – the rabbi’s wife at the end of the story – is an "agunah" as originally defined by Jewish law.
   - Discuss the symbolism of this ironic ending.

3. Why is the rabbi "doomed to exile"? What has he done to deserve this?

4. Discuss Ezekiel’s longing for the Talmudic academies of Poland in the context of the new Zionist pioneers coming to Palestine from Europe.
   - Did all of the "pioneers" leave Europe of their own free will? Or did circumstances (as opposed to ideology) bring them to the "Promised Land"?

5. In the "art vs. life" motif expressed in Ben-Uri’s relationship to the ark, one can find a hint to the obsessive artist.
   - Discuss the balance, or lack thereof, that often exists between "personal life" vs. "professional life."

6. "Our sages of blessed memory said that when a man puts his first wife away from him, the very altars weep, but here [with Ezekiel and Dina] the altars had dropped tears even as he took her to wife" (p. 46)
   - Discuss Agnon’s commentary to Jewish laws, customs and social norms as expressed through this modernist re-reading of a traditional Midrash.

7. The rabbi left in order to "redeem the forsaken in love" – L’taken Agunot.
   - Discuss how you would "repair" each of the Agunot in this story.
INTRODUCTION

In The Kerchief, we see the boy as he steps through a gateway – when he begins to learn to merge his childish thinking with the responsibilities of existing in the world. As he lies in his father’s bed and dreams of the Messiah, he incorporates the "magical realism" of his youth and applies it to the performance of mitzvot. He is growing up – his voice is amplified as the voices of his parents are decreased – his parents are in relief, moving to the background as his actual identity, his wants and ideas move to the foreground.

I. SUMMARY OF THE STORY

LEADER: Ask if someone can tell the story. Let others chime in with as many details as they can. Try, as a group, to recap the story as much as possible. A white board or large Post-Its might be useful. This should be fun (though challenging) to deconstruct.

Summary of the Story. The narrator writes of his father, who travels for a week each year, to the Lashkowitz fair. The narrator’s mother, made anxious by her husband’s absence, is consequently overcome with sadness. While the father was gone, the boy would sleep in his father’s bed and meditate on the possibility of the coming of the Messiah, who, having sat with beggars, was instantly ready to be recognized as King and Redeemer. According to the boy, in the days that the Messiah would be revealed, the narrator’s family would not know distance from each other – rather than traveling and the business of schoolwork, the family would be together, walking in the Courts of God. The boy would keep track of the days of his father’s absence by tying a new knot in his fringes (tsitsit), upon awaking each morning.

The scene described when the father would return from the fair is arrestingly beautiful. A boy’s dream for his family, a halo of light that embraces the children of the family – a togetherness precious and esteemed, from generation to generation.

The gifts that the father would bring for his family were appreciated but transitory, disappearing and lost after a while. Beyond his satisfaction of his treasures, the narrator is quite taken by a kerchief, given by his father to his mother. The mother wears the kerchief on Shabbat and Festivals, and on the day of the boy’s Bar Mitzvah, ties it in pristine condition around the boy’s neck, as an emblem of honor.

On the same day as the celebration of the Bar Mitzvah, a beggar comes to the town, shunned by all who meet him. The boy, on his return home from the House of Study, and moved by his encounter with the beggar, unknots the special kerchief from around his neck and gives it to the vagabond, who uses it to wind around his sores.

The boy returns home and is instantly reassured by his mother, that far from
meriting a scolding for giving away her kerchief, he is warmed and cheered by her pleasing love. In that moment and beyond the lives of his parents, the dreams that he dreamt about the depths and majesty of the loving and enduring embrace of his family have been powerfully realized.

II. ISSUES AND THEMES

1. The Significance of The Bar Mitzvah at Age 13.

The number 13 is significant in Jewish tradition – it is a figure that marks a certain maturity, a signpost of a child’s development -- it is representative of the attributes of God, as traditionally understood (cf. Exodus 34:6-7) and further, it is the number according to R. Ishmael, as delineating the steps and levels of hermeneutics of Talmud and Rabbinic study. There are thirteen principles of faith, as well, according to the Jewish philosopher Maimonides, (cf. the hymn, *Yigdal*).

In this story, the boy seems to complete his parents with his actions, drawing in the lines that are outlined for him, as one would finish a written Torah. The scarf takes a central and transforming place in the boy’s consciousness. This is an object that links his father and his mother, and on his Bar Mitzvah day, as he gives it to the beggar, the boy himself becomes a figure of Elijah – executing a compassionate act that can bring a redemptive future. This boy embodies both the highest aspirations of human teachings and all of the Godly aspects (*middot*) – a paragon of what it means to meet one’s Bar or Bat Mitzvah with conscious development and growth. He represents the best of Jewish tradition – Midrash and lore, grounded by secure traditions and supportive family. The Torah meets the Talmud (R. Ishmael) which in turn, meets scientific inquiry (Maimonides) and in the end, an individual’s character is made stronger by all of it. This is a day of creation.

- What is the power of celebrating a Bar or Bat Mitzvah?
- What is the importance of marking time – of delighting in lifecycle events? How can this be done in a Jewish way?
- What is the difference, if any, between sacred and ordinary time? How is this reflected in the story?
- Agnon’s story, *The Kerchief*, was written in honor of the Bar Mitzvah of Gershom Schocken the son of Agnon’s patron, Salman Schocken. Is this story an appropriate gift?

2. The Value of Objects in Our Lives

We are the products of our upbringing and our environment – we are imperfect. As the boy lies in his own bed (not his father’s), he thinks about his father coming home and subverts the *tsitsit* that he is wearing. Rather than the knots representing *mitzvot*, he ties them to count the days that his father has been absent. In his night visions, he affixes his ritual garment to a bird, which flies him to Rome where he lands on a treacherous mountain – only to be rescued by his father home again, wrapping him in his *tallit*. The
well-used siddur also, was affected by the ravages of time, as it became torn and dog-eared scraps.

- What value is there in acquiring ritual objects and utilizing family heirlooms?

- What do you make of the boy tying knots in his tsitsit to keep track of the days that his father is gone — what does this tell us about sacred objects?

- Why does the narrator give his mother’s kerchief to the beggar? Are the beggar and the Messiah the same?

3. Applying the Story to Our Modern Lives

One may read The Kerchief as the boy telling his story later, when both of his parents are deceased. Now, as a man who has experienced loss, his memory expands as he sings his love song to his childhood and the preciousness of tradition. His lessons are sweet and in a world, where all inevitably succumbs, existing in its temporariness, his tale is a forthright legacy to his children, who may follow.

- Consider the absent father — how do our own business trips and extended absences impact our families?

- Why does the mother get so upset when the father is at the fair? What do you make of the premonition — when she accurately sees her husband in danger?

- How is this story a meditation on identity and belonging — to a family, a culture or a tradition?

- Is the boy, in his action, a figure for redemption?
A BOOK THAT WAS LOST by S.Y. Agnon
A Guide for Discussion
by Rabbi Miriyam Glazer
American Jewish University

I. SUMMARY OF THE STORY

LEADER (Optional): Ask if someone can tell the story. Let others chime in with as many details as they can. Try, as a group, to recap the story as much as possible. A white board or large Post-Its might be useful. This should be fun (though challenging) to deconstruct.

Summary of the Story. In the attic of his synagogue in Buczacz, where worn-out sacred books were stored, a poor young man discovers a long-abandoned manuscript by Shmaria, the rabbi who had served as a rabbinical judge (dayan) in this small eastern European town four or five generations before. And what is the manuscript? It's an unnamed commentary on the Magen Avraham, itself a dense, difficult commentary on one of the sections of the 16th century code of Jewish law called the Shulhan Arukh ("The Set Table") by Joseph Karo (1488-1575). In case that doesn't sound obscure enough, the story goes on to tell us that Rabbi Shmaria had given up his plan to have his manuscript bound into book form because he had come upon someone else's commentary on that commentary on that code. Despite the 12 years he had poured into explicating every nuance of the Magen Avraham, he had decided that, in light of the other commentary-on-the-commentary, there was now "no need" for his work.

When the young man discovers Shmaria's manuscript, though, he learns that in fact Rabbi Shmaria had been too quick to silence his own voice. Scholars who read the manuscript now reassure him that Shmaria really had had meaningful points to make. Depriving himself of lunch for months in order to save money for postage, he mails the manuscript to the new library being established in Jerusalem, the Ginzei Yosef, precursor to the Jewish National and University Library. But years later, when he himself makes aliya and visits the library, he discovers that the book he sent from Buczacz is no where to be found. Somewhere on the journey between Buczacz and Palestine, the old rabbinic commentary seems to have forever disappeared. "What a pity," says the last line of the story with devastating understatement, "the book was lost."

[NB: It is understanding just what is so devastating about that last line that can inform a whole session about the story.]

II. ISSUES AND THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

The story raises both profoundly human and specifically Jewish issues and themes. Following the summary exercise above, a discussion of "A Book That Was Lost" might focus on any one or more of the following:

1. What does it mean to have a code that explains "The Path of Life"?
   - What is a "code for living"?
   - What does it mean to want to pass on that code from generation to generation?
1. What are the sources for the codes we truly live by?

See the end of this lesson for a commentary on this theme evoked by a reading of "A Book That Was Lost." *

2. What does it mean to have an "original" voice? To trust your voice?

- Rabbi Shmaria silences himself when he discovers the Mahazit Hashekel, with the result that his commentary is lost forever. Anthropologist Ruth Behar says the story "is about the horror of self-erosion," about not believing that the stories one has to tell are worth telling. What is your response?

- Has anyone here silenced their own creative voices because they believed they have nothing "clever" or "new" to say?

- Is there one story about your own "Path of Life" (an experience, personal belief, or idea) that you want to pass on, that you would like others to hear?

3. How do we bridge the Diaspora and Israel? What has been "lost" en route to Israel?

- What do you make of the young man who, in addressing his manuscript, remarks, "I added the name of the country, Palestine, and not the Land of Israel, in memory of the destruction of the Temple" (p131)?

- Does the story suggest that the holy efforts of the past could never reach a Jerusalem still in exile from being the capital of the redeemed Land of Israel?

- What has been transported between the Diaspora and Israel, good and not-so-good? What we might wish to see transported?

- What of the past have we American Jews incorporated into our present? What precious "books" – what learning, knowledge, wisdom -- of the past have we lost?

4. The Strange History of Jewish Codes (An Advanced Discussion)

"A Book that was Lost" can also serve as a launching pad for a discussion of the strange history of Jewish law codes since the Mishnah, about 220 CE (see A Living Tree: The Roots and Growth of Jewish Law by Elliot Dorff and Arthur Rosett).

There was, for example, the brilliantly comprehensive 12th century Mishneh Torah of Maimonides – rejected by one rabbi as a "product of overweening conceit" because, unlike those who came before him, Maimonides provided no "footnotes" – no evidence for his decisions -- and thus essentially turned the complexities of the Jewish legal tradition into a book of rules. Centuries later, the Shulhan Arukh, which as Karo wrote it included the practices of Sephardic Jewry only, became the definitive code only because of historical coincidence: the additional material added to it by Ashkenazi Rabbi Moses Isserles, who had been working on his own book when Karo's appeared.

The Magen Avraham, a commentary on Karo's work, was written by Abraham Gombiner, in the 17th century, and the commentary on that, the Mahazit Hashekel, in the 18th.

- How are we to understand this Jewish tradition of code-commenting?
• Could we take just one behavior described in the *Shulhan Arukh* and follow its evolution through these commentaries?

• Should we depend on these codes, rather than study the original sources ourselves?

• What are the dangers of following a code, and what are the dangers of not following a code?

• Is it better for a judge to "act only according to what he sees with his own eyes" (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 131a) or to rely on legal precedent only?

From the meaning of "codes" in our own lives and a searching out of the real codes we live by or wish we could only find; to a focus on the "books" we ourselves may have set aside out of a sense that, like Shmoria, we do not trust in our own voices; to a probing of the bridges both in our own lives and in the life of the Jewish people between the past and the present, discussing "A Book That Was Lost" brims with possibilities.

May the insights expressed and heard in that discussion be the first step toward reconstituting the too-long lost book.

* Professor Alan Block, University of Wisconsin-Stout, on reading "A Book That Was Lost": We all, I think, choose to live according to a variety of explicit and implicit codes [which] regulate our behavior and thought even as they influence our thought and behavior…Several codes are elaborately, even eloquently, written…the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Ten Commandments, Brown vs. the Board of Education, Emily Post’s etiquette…They mean to define order…The larger issues that the codes address and upon which they are based – like what kind of society do we mean to produce, and white kind of people do we mean to be – are often relatively obvious….But where is the code that determines the bedtime routines that ought to function in my household? Where are the rules to establish on which needs to require baths, or how large a "No, thank you" portion must be to be counted as such?...I want to find some commentary to help me on my muddled way…Somewhere out there is the book that was lost which, if I could find, would elaborate some of the more obscure commentary on the significant codes in my life and provide me, perhaps, with answers for some of the more difficult questions my living has raised. Somewhere out there in the vast library of the world rests the book that was lost awaiting my reading…The book that changed my life is the book that was lost – the book for which I continue to search.

(from *The Book that Changed My Life, or What I Didn’t Read on My Summer Vacation*)
INTRODUCTION

"The Sense of Smell" is, at one and the same time, a sort of sweet, evocative, fantasy of literary one-upsmanship; a serious claim about what Jewish literature should be, and, finally, a lovely Sukkoth story about the beauty and power of the tradition of ushpizin, holy guests who visit the sukkah. It asks us today, as readers, to really ponder the place of language and literature in our lives — and the gift of the Hebrew language in particular. How would our own lives be enriched by delving into the treasures of our tradition — the Torah, the psalms, the prayers? Indirectly, Agnon's story can also lead us into a lively discussion of the sensory richness of Jewish ritual, an aspect of our tradition we all too often overlook.

I. SUMMARY OF THE STORY

LEADER (Optional): Ask if someone can tell the story. Let others chime in with as many details as they can. Try, as a group, to recap the story as much as possible. A white board or large Post-Its might be useful. This should be fun (though challenging) to deconstruct.

Summary of the Story. The story begins with a paean to the holiness of the Hebrew language. It goes on to critique Agnon's contemporaries for the "mess" they make when they try to write in Hebrew, claiming that their poor Hebrew is a result of putting "worldly matters first and words of Torah second. If they would make Torah their basis, the Torah would come to their aid," says the narrator (p140). And the story goes on to illustrate just that.

To begin with, the narrator explains the source of his own writing, insisting upon his own profound devotion to the sacred literature of the past and his commitment as a writer to serving the call of the spirit and the call of tradition "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" (p141)

That metaphoric "little hut" cleverly begins to play a more vital role in our story, though. For, switching gears, the narrator relates a conflict he had with a Hebrew grammarian — presumably, one of those who put "worldly matters first." The grammarian accuses him of misusing the verb "smell" — he argues that you can’t say, "the sukkah smells" because only a person can "smell." (When you consider it, "Smell" — in Hebrew just as in English — really is a strange sort of word: after all, we use it to mean both "has an odor" as well as "detecting an odor," as in "I smell a rat"). Worried that he has misused his beloved Hebrew language, the narrator consults scholars — but no one can give him an answer based on anything more than their own opinion. He is about to give up when the actual aroma of the sukkah — an actual "little hut," and undoubtedly the source of the initial image — rises up before him "until I really saw that it was smelling. I left the words as they were" (p142).

And then the "magic" happens. A series of coincidences lead him to dream of Rabbi Jacob of Lissa (1760-1832), author of the prayer book A Way of Life, and a great opponent of the maskilim, those who had called for Jews to "put worldly matters first" — to master secular learning. Our narrator gets out of bed, walks over to his bookcase, and in his copy of A Way of Life discovers a marker pointing him to a line in Rabbi Jacob’s prayer book: "One uses lots of flowers that smell sweet to make the holiday joyous" (p144). No longer wanting to sleep, the
narrator opens the book of Psalms, and comes upon psalm 45, which academics may regard as a magnificent royal wedding song, but in the narrator’s view is "a Song of Love...a song in praise of the sages’ disciples" (p144). The lines he quotes from the psalm echoes what earlier he had described as his own mission as a writer: "My heart overflows with a goodly matter...my tongue is the pen of a ready scribe."

Bewildered by the psalm’s line "Myrrh and aloes and cassia are all thy garments," he turns for an explanation to the medieval sage Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhak) – and lo and behold, not only does Rashi’s explanation support the narrator’s own earlier use of the verb "smell," but it does double duty – it serves as a "got'cha" retort to the grammarian who provoked this story to begin with. For Rashi has written, "All thy garments smell like fragrant spices. And its meaning is that all your betrayals and foul deeds will be forgiven and will smell sweet before Me." And the narrator adds, "My mind was eased, like a person smelling flowers that smell."

### III. ISSUES AND THEMES

1. **What is it to be a Jewish writer?**

"The Sense of Smell," written before the establishment of the state of Israel, challenges readers with its claim about the spiritual obligations of a true Jewish writer, based on the image of the Jewish people still suffering the conditions of exile.

   a. Does the fact that we now have a state make a difference? Can we still claim to be in exile?

   b. Are Jewish writers—Hebrew or English—under any spiritual, moral, or cultural obligation today? What do the Jewish writers we know of reveal about the Jewish sensibility and condition today?

   c. Imagine being a writer: what stories would each of us tell if we saw ourselves as "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"?


To be a translator from one language to another is to know full well that translation is a true impossibility: the best we can do is to convey a sense of an original, like the sweet aroma that arises from a flower-laden sukkah or from a fresh etrog. Indeed, Agnon’s image of making oneself a little hut in which to tell of the glory of the palace also vividly describes the relationship of a translation to the original.

   a. We can have a rich discussion about the very power of the Hebrew language by choosing a single psalm—perhaps even psalm 45, cited with such love in the story—and really probing some of the rich associations, confusions, and questions the original Hebrew raises, and how various translations seek to resolve them (compare, for example, the JPS, King James, New Oxford Annotated Bible, and new Robert Alter translations).

3. **"The sukkah smells...."**

   a. What Jewish rituals involve smells, or fragrance?

   b. What other parts of Judaism and Jewish tradition involve the senses?
i. Possible responses: fresh challah on Friday night; the spices of Havdallah; the etrog we carry on Sukkoth; latkes or sufganiot on Hanukkah; the fragrant roses and greenery on Shavuot; the shofar; Shabbat candles; the lights of the Hanukkiyah; the wine we bless for so many ritual occasions.

c. OPTIONAL:

i. Invite your group to "walk through the Jewish year," from beginning to end, noting how the various senses are stimulated or celebrated.

ii. Start five separate lists, one for each sense, and list examples of how Judaism involves each sense.

4. The People of the Body?

We often focus on our Jewish tradition as either an intellectual or spiritual one. Based on the preceding discussion of Agnon’s "The Sense of Smell"…

a. What are the ways in which Judaism celebrates the human body as a divine gift?

b. In what ways can we unify mind, body and spirit? Are they ever really disconnected?
INTRODUCTION

The significance of the story "From Lodging to Lodging" deepens when we recall that Shmuel Yosef Czaczes – the man who became Shmuel (Shai) Agnon - first emigrated to Palestine in 1908, during the "Second Aliyah," the second wave of mass immigration to Palestine which lasted from 1904 to the outbreak of the First World War.

This second wave also included thousands of eastern European Jews who came not because they were idealists or even necessarily Zionists, but because riots, pogroms, and desperate poverty drove them there (and going to Palestine was cheaper than going to America). A newspaper commented, "People are arriving without money, without job qualifications, without knowledge...poor refugees wander through Jaffa like shadows..."¹ One Zionist leader, described the immigrants as "poor, ragged, miserable people with tattered bundles"²

Thus, the poor, neglected, diseased young child depicted in "From Lodging to Lodging," whatever symbolic role he may play, may also have been a common sight for our author.

STORY SUMMARY

The story opens with a description of how ill the narrator has been all winter, and how, when the spring comes, though feeling better, he decides to move to Tel Aviv in the hope that the sea air will restore him to good health. These motifs of illness vs. good health resonate throughout the story.

The lodgings he rents in Tel Aviv are so near the central bus station, the noise keeps him awake at night and, in turn, the lack of sleep makes him weary all day, so much so that he can’t really take advantage of being close to the sea. Intensifying the images of illness, we learn that the landlord has a child -- a "meeting ground for all kinds of ailments" -- who becomes very attached to the narrator. Neglected by his mother (a "do-gooder" concerned with others rather than with her own son), the child left to "lie around on the doorstep of the house and lick at dirt or scrape plaster from the wall and eat it" (p149). Indeed, Agnon makes the child seem increasingly pitiful: he cries and groans all night, he sticks his fingernails into the narrator’s eyes, and though "flies and mosquitoes crawled over his sores he was too lethargic to chase them away" (p150). Yet the child asserts an irresistible claim upon the narrator: "When I went out, the child would climb on me with a double measure of love, and would not leave me alone until I took him in my arms and rocked him" (150).

His friends, talking to the narrator "as people talk to someone who is sick" (151), insist that he change his lodgings -- particularly since he has come to Tel Aviv not to be kept awake at night, not to rock a pitiful ragamuffin, but rather "to be healed" (151). The narrator argues that the Talmud teaches us that "A man should never change his quarters" but his friends pay no attention, and, at last, one friend, indeed, finds him new lodgings.

Not only are the lodgings new, they are ideal: they embody the dreams of a renewed, healthy, Eretz Yisrael and a reborn, healthy people. The small house is set on a grassy hill far

¹ Hayom ("Today"), 1907.
² Menahem Sheinkin, quoted in Imigrantim by Gur Alroey.
from the madding crowd of the city, amidst vineyards and orchards the landlord himself has
planted. The description of the house, and the cultivation of the land surrounding it with fruits and
vegetables and flowers, makes it the very embodiment of the "redemption of the land" cherished
by the young Zionist pioneers. For the owners, the years of exile, the Diaspora, are truly over:
"...we do not need to wear ourselves out on the road," says the wife. "We live here in our house,
enjoying everything with which the Lord has blessed us." (p155)

The motifs of illness and health continue, as the narrator looks forward to the "sweet
repose" he will feel if he moves into the house. In the meantime, before he does so, he develops a
problem with his eyes and is warned against touching his eyes with his fingers "lest they become
worse." But when he returns to his Tel Aviv lodgings, the child, whose own eyes are diseased and
whose fingers are dirty, continues to poke the narrator in the eyes (and there’s no indication at all
that the narrator tries to stop him). How profoundly that image of disease contrasts with what the
narrator discovers when he himself goes on the road:

I passed through the land and I saw that we had several more villages. Places that had
produced only thistles and thorns had become like a garden of God. And like the land, so too the
people were happy in their labors and rejoicing in building their land, their sons and daughters
healthy and wholesome. Their hands were not soiled, and their eyes were not diseased.... (p156).

IDEAS AND THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

In the end, the narrator chooses not to live "in a pleasant room, in a pleasant climate, with
pleasant furniture and pleasant people."

1. Why does the narrator come back from his trip, go to the new lodgings, and then abruptly
decide not to stay?

2. Why does he choose the noisy, dirty, lodgings in Tel Aviv and the increasingly pitiful, child
who has become even more diseased in his short absence, with his eyelashes now "stuck
together, covered with some sort of green pus"?

3. Even though the narrator embraces the child, why does he never take any action, that we
know of, to make the child healthier?

"We will never be granted peace like the peace we had here at first, until the Messiah comes"
(p157).

1. Is Agnon suggesting that ultimately all of our efforts for true spiritual health and peace for
the Jewish people can never resolve the "illnesses" we are subject to "until the Messiah
comes"?

2. Or is it precisely that idea (waiting for the Messiah) that accounts for the "troubled vision"
from which the narrator, and the child, suffer?

3. What would the Jewish people see with a wholly clear, healthy, vision?

On the Road or At Home

1. In what ways are all of us always — as Jews, as Americans, as individuals — still "on the
road"?

2. In what ways are we at home?
3. What do you consider your home? Your home-away-from-home? Your homeland?

**Troubled Vision**
1. Where in our culture, both Jewish and American, do we find the equivalent of an "eye" disease, or a troubled vision?

2. Is there a symbolic equivalent today, for Jews, Israelis or Americans, of the "child neglected by its parents"? What would clear-sightedness look like?

"**Unique Among Houses, the Pleasantest of Houses**"
1. In what ways has the modern state of Israel succeeded in becoming "unique among houses, the pleasantest of houses," and in what ways does it need to change in order to become so?

2. What about the United States makes it "unique among houses, the pleasantest of houses, or how does it need to change to become so"? What about California? What about Los Angeles? What about your own neighborhood?
SUMMARY

OPTIONAL - Ask if someone can tell the story. Let others chime in with as many details as they can. Try, as a group, to recap the story as much as possible. A white board or large Post-Its might be useful. This should be fun, though challenging.

This is the story of Raphael the Scribe, who copies Torah scrolls, tefillin and mezuzot — many times he would write a Torah scroll as a memorial for one who has died. His wife, Miriam, is introduced, as one who cleans and purifies the home and makes the writing easier for her husband. Raphael’s method of working is described — he was very punctilious about purity and study and he regularly spent the day secluded and isolated.

Miriam and Raphael’s house was divided in the middle by a partition made of boards, with the wife on one side and the husband on the other — Miriam is presented as barren, who ”pulls threads” into garments for orphans, imagining the clothes are for her son, all the while.

In the house there is a feeling of constant Shabbat quiet and peace and a cycle of procreative potential that is never actualized. Miriam requests that her husband make a Torah scroll for them as she begins to make a mantle for the Torah instead of garments for children. She dies childless, soon thereafter and Raphael prepares to write a Torah scroll in her memory. The scribe finds that he is unable to write even a single letter, properly. After the ritual bathhouse (mikveh) was shut down he immerses himself in the icy river instead and consequently completes the Torah scroll. But at a price — at this point, Raphael is described as emaciated, shrunken, hollowed and turning gray.

As he completes the Torah scroll, Raphael sings a melody that reminds him of a Simchat Torah, long ago, when he first encountered Miriam. They were brought together on accident and betrothed by the wise remark of the rabbi. In a discombobulated and unreal state, Raphael goes looking for the wedding dress and the story ends, with Raphael the Scribe holding his Torah scroll, with his wife’s dress spread over him and the scroll, itself, illuminated briefly in the silent darkness.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why would Agnon, an author (Sofer, in modern Hebrew), choose to write about Raphael, a scribe (also called Sofer)?
   a. Discuss the differences between a Sofer of Torah scrolls versus a modern-day Sofer/Author.
   b. What is the role of a writer in shaping tradition?
   c. What does it mean to be a writer with the Jewish tradition?

2. What is significant about Raphael specializing in the writing of Torah scrolls for childless couples? Can a Torah scroll replace a life?

3. How are piety and religiosity presented in this story?
a. How do these issues affect the relationship between Raphael and Miriam?

4. Why is it important to the story that Raphael lived close to the synagogue, house of study and ritual bath?

5. Discuss the symbolism of the following:
   a. The embroidered wall hanging with its picture and letters
   b. The willows not yet boiled in water
   c. The amulet (not written in Hebrew) with the spider web woven over it
   d. The dark beam that stretches from one end of the house to the other, holding many sacred books
   e. The mirror
   f. The Torah Scroll
   g. The Ritual Bath
      i. See if you can create links between the above items, and then discuss what they tell us about the relationship between Miriam and Raphael.

6. How does clothing act symbolically in the story?
   a. Miriam's wedding dress?
   b. Raphael's burned robe?
   c. The tallit?

7. Why do you think Miriam was barren?
   a. Is her predicament a matter for God, herself, Raphael, or everyone?
   b. Consider the following in your discussion: "Why were our forefathers and mothers barren? Because God desires the tefillot (prayers) of the righteous." (Yevamot 64a)

8. According to traditional halakha (Jewish law), a man is obliged to have children, at least one boy and one girl, but a woman is not. The Talmud (also in Yevamot 64a) says that "an artist is caught between the fires of his work and the obligations of his family life."
   a. How do the above affect your understanding of the story of Raphael and Miriam? (Bear in mind that "mitzvah" can be translated as "obligation.")

9. "She [Miriam] had not been inscribed on high for a long life, and was plucked while still in her youth." (p.176)
   a. Why does Miriam die?
   b. What is notable about Agnon's language in describing Miriam's death?
   c. Compare Miriam's occupation and approach to life to Raphael's.

10. Reflecting on all the above, what is your reading of the final scene of Raphael and Miriam's wedding?
INTRODUCTION

Traditionally read by many as an innocent children’s folktale, The Fable of the Goat is actually a deep exploration of many of the themes that occupy a central place in the writing of S.Y. Agnon.

I. SUMMARY OF THE STORY

LEADER: Ask if someone can tell the story. Let others chime in with as many details as they can. Try, as a group, to recap the story as much as possible. A white board or large Post-Its might be useful. [This should be fun (though challenging) to deconstruct.]

Summary of the Story. The story is told of an old man who falls ill, and whose illness causes a deep and heavy cough. As a remedy, the doctor prescribes goat’s milk. The man acquires a goat that displays a strange pattern of behavior: everyday, the goat disappears for a few hours, only to return with her udders full of the sweetest milk that soothed the old man’s cough. Mystified by this strange pattern, the man’s son sets out to solve this mystery by tying a cord to the goat and following her on her walk. As he follows the goat, holding on to the cord, she leads him to a long cave, the journey through which ends in the Land of Israel. Looking around him, he sees a beautiful landscape that resembles the Garden of Eden. Realizing that he has arrived to the “Promised Land,” he writes a note to his father, instructing him on how to follow the goat to Israel. Putting the note in the goat’s ear, he sends the goat through the cave back to his father. When the father sees the goat return alone, he assumes that his son was killed, reacting with grief and despair. In his anger, the father has the goat slaughtered, only to then find the note from his son. The story concludes on a tragic note of separation between father and son, and with the cave mysteriously disappearing, the father is eternally banished to exile.

II. ISSUES AND THEMES

1. The status of Exile as an "illness"
   “The tale is told of an old man who groaned from his heart” (p.188). A classic theme in Biblical and Rabbinic literature is exile from the Land of Israel as representative of curse and punishment. The old man groaning “from his heart,” as opposed to “coughing from his lungs,” symbolically tells the reader that the old man’s illness is not really physical, but emotional. He is pained by the loneliness and frustration of exile.
2. **The fantasy of Israel as perfection, as a "Garden of Eden"**

The goat's milk is described as "milk that was sweeter than honey, and whose taste was the taste of Eden" (p.188). Israel is described as a landscape with "lofty mountains, and hills full of the choicest fruit, and a fountain of living waters that flowed down from the mountains" (p.189). The fact that the goat's milk comes from Israel, and soothes the man's groaning ("…this milk which is sweet to my palate and a balm to all my bones" – p.188) is symbolic of Israel as a cure to the spiritual ailment of exile. To taste the sweet milk of Israel can temporarily cure the old man's "groaning from his heart." This vision of the Land of Israel is typical of the fantasy that Diaspora Jewry constructs in its mind when yearning to ascend to the Holy Land.

3. **The fantasy of the magical "Messianic Journey" to Israel**

The magical cave represents a sort of messianic "magic carpet," and the goat, who delivers the "taste of Eden" to the Diaspora, is the same goat who can deliver the father to the Promised Land, if only he "holds on to this cord which is tied to the goat's tail and follows the footsteps of the goat" (p. 190).

In the original Hebrew, the term used by Agnon for the "cord" is נישוח – pronounced Meshicha, which intentionally sounds like נşiḥ/Mashiach, the Hebrew term for Messiah. To grasp onto the cord and simply hold on, and "then your journey will be secure, and you will enter the Land of Israel" (p.190) is a creative expression of a typical messianic fantasy. We might ask here, how does knowing about this wordplay effect our understanding of the story?

4. **The breakdown of communication**

between father and son, between generations, and between Israel and Diaspora. And, an ironic twist on the Biblical Story of Jacob and Joseph.

In the Book of Genesis, when Joseph is sold into slavery, his brothers come back to their father Jacob with Joseph's multi-colored coat dipped in blood: "They slaughtered a goat and dipped the coat in blood"(Genesis 37:31). Upon seeing the coat dipped in blood, Jacob reacts with grief: "A wild beast must have eaten him! My Joseph has been torn to pieces! He tore his robes in grief and put on sackcloth. He kept himself in mourning for many days…I will go down to the grave mourning for my son" (Genesis 37:33-35). That Agnon drew from Genesis in describing the father's grief and mourning is clear from the striking linguistic similarities between the two: "So he went, weeping and mourning over his son, for he said, 'An evil beast has devoured him, my son is assuredly rent in pieces.' And he refused to be comforted, saying, 'I will go down to my grave in mourning for my son'.” (p.190).

Beyond the linguistic similarities, what is the thematic symbolism and message behind the use of this Biblical language? The Biblical verses used here evoke the aura of separation between father and son. Jacob and Joseph are separated for seventeen years, and Jacob suffers bitterly as a result of this separation. Ultimately, Jacob and Joseph are re-united before Jacob's death, thus Jacob not going "down to the grave mourning" his son.

In Agnon's story, father and son are never re-united, a tragic twist on the Jacob/Joseph story. Furthermore, as opposed to Joseph who never once contacted his father, the son in Agnon's story does write his father a letter, but the father discovers the letter only after he has the goat slaughtered. One may ask why the father did not initially search for a letter from the son, tragically discovering it when it is now too late? Agnon is once again
alluding to the communication gap between the generations, in this case telling us that it never dawned on the father to look for a letter from his son, because there was, in fact, no communication between the two. Much like the letter surprised the father, the father is also aware that he is alienated from his son: "Woe to the father who banished his son" (p.190).

This breakdown in communication between generations is a direct allusion to the tensions that developed during Agnon's own lifetime between the older generation who could not bring themselves to leave the Diaspora, and thus banished themselves to the woes of exile ("Woe to me, for I could have gone up to the Land of Israel in one bound, and now I must suffer out my days in this exile" – p.191), versus the younger generation that broke with the traditions of their parents and moved to Israel to fulfill the burgeoning Zionist promise ("From the ends of the earth I lift up my voice in song to tell you that I have come in peace to the Land of Israel" – p.190).

To the older generation, "the mouth of the cave has been closed, and there is no longer a short way" (p.191), whereas to the younger generation, "That youth, if he has not died, shall bear fruit in his old age, full of sap and richness, calm and peaceful in the Land of the Living."

The stark contrast between the fate of the father and the destiny of the son evokes an aura of deep alienation between the two. In yet another tragic irony, the father does "go down to his grave mourning," except he does not mourn his son, rather he mourns his own missed opportunity for redemption and his continued miserable existence in exile.

III. FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. What is the symbolism of the son being delayed by the Sabbath? (p.189)

2. Why would Agnon describe the son’s letter as being written with "the ink for the writing of Torah scrolls"? (p.190)

3. Explore any further comparisons and contrasts between the Biblical story of Jacob and Joseph and Agnon’s father and son in this story.

4. Discuss this story in light of current generation gaps, and in light of the contemporary relationship between Diaspora Jewry and the State of Israel.
Traditionally read by many as an innocent children’s folktale, The Fable of the Goat is actually a deep exploration of many of the themes that occupy a central place in the writing of S.Y. Agnon.

I. Read the Story Out Loud
   a. Share the reading by going around the table, taking one or two paragraphs at a time.
   b. No one should be required to read who does not wish to; anyone who wants to read should be able to.

II. Share First Impressions
   a. What is the story "about"? Consider the year it was written (1925).
   b. What themes, images or conflicts stood out for you?
   c. Does this story work only as an allegory? Or in other ways too? Does it resonate for you personally?

THEMES
Choose one or more of the followings themes or ideas to discuss among the people at your table. You may spend as much on a theme as your group wishes. You do not need to finish all the sections, and you are welcome to skip around if you wish.

The Illness of the Old Man
- What is the old man suffering from, that causes him to "groan in his heart"? (p. 188)
- What might his symptoms be?
- Why does the story begin with this sentence?

The Milk of the Goat
- What is it about the milk of the goat that makes it "a balm to all my bones"? (p. 188)
- What is the symbolism here?
- What, if anything, do you see as Agnon’s commentary?
The Cord as Messiah
According to the son’s note -- written from Safed, the center of Jewish mysticism -- the goat will deliver the father to Israel if he "holds on to this cord which is tied to the goat’s tail and follows the footsteps of the goat" (p.190). In the Hebrew original, the term used by Agnon for "cord" is נישן – pronounced Meshicha, which deliberately sounds like נישן/Mashiach, the Hebrew term for Messiah.

- How does this word play effect your own interpretation of the story?
- Do you think Agnon is using this metaphor ironically or genuinely?
- Is it still possible for Jews to simply "grasp onto the cord" and be lead to Israel/Eden? Was it ever truly possible?

The Relationship Between Generations, and Between Israel and Diaspora

So he went, weeping and mourning over his son, for he said, "An evil beast has devoured him, my son is assuredly rent in pieces." And he refused to be comforted, saying, "I will go down to my grave in mourning for my son."

Fable of the Goat, p.190

[Joseph's brothers] slaughtered a goat and dipped the coat in blood. [And Jacob saw it] and said: "A wild beast must have eaten him! My Joseph has been torn to pieces!" He tore his robes in grief and put on sackcloth. He kept himself in mourning for many days... He refused to be comforted, saying: "I will go down to the grave mourning for my son."

Genesis 37:31-35.

- What do you think is the thematic symbolism or message behind Agnon’s use of Biblical language and story elements?
- What or who do you think the father mourning for at the end of Agnon’s story?

The Fable Today
Consider all the historical events and circumstances that have affected the Jewish people between 1925, when this story was written, and today.

- Does the story still "work" today as an allegory?
- Have the themes and symbolism changed? Or are they the same?

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. What is the symbolism of the son being delayed by the Sabbath? (p.189)

2. Why would Agnon describe the son’s letter as being written with "the ink for the writing of Torah scrolls"? (p.190)

3. Explore any further comparisons and contrasts between the Biblical story of Jacob and Joseph and Agnon’s father and son in this story.

4. Discuss this story in light of current generation gaps, and in light of the contemporary relationship between Diaspora Jewry and the State of Israel.
INTRODUCTION

"The Tale of the Menorah" is contained within a collection of Agnon's stories that take us back to his hometown, Buczacz. This collection — which was originally published posthumously in a book called The City and the Fullness Thereof (Ir U'me'lo'ah) — included multiple tales that, taken together, paint a picture of life in an Eastern European town. Included in this collection is the fable "The Tale of the Menorah," which is also in our volume.

Agnon's stories frequently read like folk literature and legend but also utilize modern literary techniques and devices such as wordplay, symbolism, historical allusions, shifting points of view, and nonlinear narratives. Agnon often intersperses fantasy and reality. Jewish culture, language, and history feature often in both his content and allusions.

For this session, we will discuss the story "The Tale of the Menorah" on three levels:

1. The basic storyline
2. The symbolic meaning of the parts of the story; and
3. The larger message and its implications

I. SUMMARY OF THE STORY

LEADER: Ask if someone can tell the story. Let others chime in with as many details as they can. Try, as a group, to recap the story as much as possible. A white board or large Post-Its might be useful. [This should be fun (though challenging) to deconstruct.]

1 — The wise Rabbi Nahman is a very important advisor to the king. The king rewards Rabbi Nahman by offering to grant him whatever he desires. Rabbi Nahman asks for nothing, and the king therefore makes "a holy donation to God".

2 — The king commands his metalworkers to make a great brass 7-branched menorah to place in the Great Synagogue of Buczacz. But such a replica of the Holy Temple's menorah is forbidden in the Jewish tradition, and after debate, the Jews remove the middle branch of the menorah. Later, when the Jews are persecuted by Chmielnicki1 "and the town's Gentiles made the house of God into a church," the menorah is dropped into the river.

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1 Bohdan Chmielnicki (or, Bogdan Khmelnitsky), 1595-1657. As Hetman, or Leader, of the Ukrainian Cossacks, he led devastating pogroms against the Jews, resulting in 15-30,000 deaths in the years 1648-1656. 50% of Jews in the Ukraine were killed under Chmielnicki. At the time, these pogroms were considered the most traumatic event in Jewish history since the Bar Kokhba revolt.
3 – Many years later, Jews return to their town, and on the Saturday night of the Selichot prayers, children shine their candles into the river and notice the menorah. It is retrieved from the water and returned to the synagogue, and used for light throughout the years.

4 – In the following generation, the Jews add a leaded brass eagle to the middle of the Menorah, as a sign of allegiance to Poland.

5 – After Poland is conquered by Austria, the Jews welcome the Austrians; to avoid a political disaster; they smash the Polish-white eagle and replace it with a 2-headed eagle symbolic of Austria (the excess metal is used to make dreidels).

6 – During the Polish uprising against Austria, a Galician Jew smashes the 2-headed Austrian eagle with a hammer (and the excess brass is used to make dice).

7 – Another 2-headed eagle is made to replace the first one.

8 – During the Great War, when Austria and Russia become enemies, soldiers nearly seize the menorah, but it is finally taken and hidden by a metalworker.

9 – After the war, Jews return to Buczacz, and they have no lamps.

10 – One man, who had met the metalworker, tries to find the menorah in the mountains around Buczacz but cannot find it.

11 – The searcher meets the metalworker and together they unearth the hidden menorah.

II. SYMBOLISM

A. The menorah begins as a gift from the non-Jewish king, as a reward to a sage for his involvement with that king.
   - What might the menorah symbolize?
   - Is it something as general as Jewish history, or something as specific as the Torah?

B. What do these details suggest about the experiences of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe?
   - the menorah is made, religiously unacceptably, by well-meaning gentiles;
   - almost all of the violence actually done to the menorah is done by the hands of Jews themselves;
   - the menorah is drowned, then pulled up from the water;
   - the holidays of Selichot and Yom Kippur are both mentioned.

C. Power & Mystery
   - In the story, who or what holds power?
   - What is the Menorah’s actual power?
   - What is the role of mystery – or, secrets – in the story?
- Do we, as the readers (along with the omniscient narrator) have more power than the characters in the story, because we know the tale from beginning to end?
  - Why would Agnon give us information that is out of the reach of his characters?

D. Throughout the story, the Jews of Buczacz struggle to relate to their land of residence.
  - How does the use of the symbol of the menorah highlight these themes?
  - Why, of all things, is it a menorah that goes from hand to hand?
  - How does the journey of the menorah help us to understand these issues of vulnerability, alienation and adaptability?

E. Read the last paragraph in the story.
  - How does this paragraph frame the story?

III. MESSAGE & CONTEXT

"The Tale of the Menorah" explores the relationship of Judaism to political turmoil and exile.

- Does this story ultimately have a positive or negative message?
- Does it offer a sense of hope?
- Is Agnon being descriptive or prescriptive? That is, is he describing the situation as he understands it to have been; or, is he suggesting that this will be the case in the future as well?
- Is the story of the menorah applicable only to Eastern European Jews?
- As American Jews, does the message of the menorah ring true for us as well?
- If we were to read our own American Jewish experience into the tale, which parts of the journey of the menorah would fit the American experience?
- Alternatively, can we think of an object that would better express the American Jewish story?
INTRODUCTION

S. Y. Agnon (1888 – 1970) is considered perhaps the greatest Hebrew writer of the 20th century. His prolific writing career spanned six decades and his work is unlike any others'. In the early years of Zionism and statehood, when other writers were addressing the Jewish collective and political issues of Palestine, Agnon focused on the social and spiritual life in the lost shtetls of the past. When other writers depicted realistically the emerging secular society, Agnon immersed himself in the world of classical Jewish culture and the inner life of the Jews. His stories expressed the psychic struggles of the alienated, enlightened Jew against a distant background of peaceful shtetl piety. The events of Agnon's own life figured prominently in his stories; he also drew extensively from Biblical, Talmudic, and midrashic literature as well as the Chasidic literary tradition.

Some of Agnon's stories read like rabbinic midrashim, some like contemporary literature, and others like the writers who influenced Agnon, such as Franz Kafka. He often interprets, paraphrases, and recasts traditional references to extend the meaning of his own words and the traditional text. This technique brings a unique voice to the stories and pushes us to explore the layers of meaning implied by these references. However, the stories at even their most literal level give the reader insight into the complex mind of the writer and his struggle to define and explore the human and the Jewish struggle. As a narrator, Agnon is playful and ironic, often causing the reader to struggle with the fine line between fact and fiction.

With that introduction in mind, in this class we will discuss the story "At the Outset of the Day" (1951) on three levels:
1. the basic storyline;
2. the symbolic meaning of the parts of the story; and
3. the larger message and its implications.

I. SUMMARY OF THE STORY

LEADER: ask if someone can tell the story. Let others chime in with as many details as they can. Try, as a group, to recap the story as much as possible. A whiteboard or large Post-Its might be helpful. [This should be fun (though challenging) to deconstruct.]

- The narrator flees from enemies with his daughter to the city.
- It is the eve of Yom Kippur. In the courtyard of the synagogue, a fire burns his daughter's dress and she trembles, naked, from cold.
- The father has nothing to cover her and after looking in the Beit Midrash (House of Study) he asks for clothing from the family of his friend Reb Alter. The family, busy listening to the reading of a letter, turns him away empty-handed.

- The story ends in the open courtyard of the Great Synagogue. The father sees the House of Study full of Jews, the doors of the Ark are open. "My soul fainted with me, and I stood and prayed as those wrapped in prayer and ritual gowns. And even my little girl, who had dozed off, repeated in her sleep each and every prayer in sweet melodies no ear has ever heard."

II. SYMBOLISM AND MEANING

Characters
- Whom does the daughter represent? (European Jewry after the Holocaust? Israeli Jews fighting the war/s alone? Others? The soul?)
- Whom does Reb Alter represent (in Yiddish, "Alter" means "old")? What about his remaining relatives (perhaps the remnants of a community now long gone)?
- Who is the "Tall man with the red beard"? Is this a reference to Communism?
- Who might be the man with the spectacles? He knows what is going on but seems unable to see through his glasses. The narrator declares: "I was no longer angry with my enemy, being so gripped in fury with this man." Who is this new enemy? Is this perhaps an academic? Or a symbol of American Jewry?

Ritual symbols
- The entire story takes place on the eve of Yom Kippur. This is the holiest day of the year – a day of communal prayer and atonement for sins. How does this add irony and tension?
- A "whitish mist spiraled up the steps" of the Beit Midrash. What might this mean? (Is it smoke? A symbol of God’s presence?)
- Why is the memorial candle the cause of violence, loss and alienation? (Does the fire of memory destroy the future generation’s hope? That fire causes her to be naked and vulnerable.)
- Notice that the family of Reb Alter has not lit the memorial candle. Why might this be? What letter do you think they are reading? What might that letter be a symbol of?
- Why does the narrator continue to search the Geniza for books as protection?

Context & Place
- Who is the "enemy"?
- What does the Great Synagogue symbolize?
What does the Beit ha-Midrash symbolize?

What is the meaning of the Geniza – the room where worn-out fragments of holy books are saved? None of these are places that the narrator finds refuge or covering for his daughter.

III. MESSAGE AND CONTEXT

In this dreamy, Kafkaesque tale, Agnon describes the destruction of the Jewish world. "Wherever I directed my eyes, I met emptiness."

- This emptiness could be both physical and spiritual. Which one do you think Agnon is emphasizing?

- What is his message about books? Agnon describes a world in which one can’t find even fragments of books, and the naked human soul has no garment (made of torn book leaves) to cover itself with. And what might the letter be?

- Is this story perhaps a flashback? In other words, is the helplessness and failure of the narrator a remembrance of a time before the present reality? How might it function as an explanation for a present reality?

- According to this tale, what are the forces of Jewish degeneration? (Some are external: the "enemy" of secular learning as represented by Gad; and others are internal: the inability of the Jewish community to support itself.)

- How do you judge the final mood of the story? Is it positive or negative? Does the daughter’s sleep-prayer represent an indestructible spirituality, or a pitiable sentimentality?
**Rabbi Daniel Bouskila**

Daniel Bouskila has been the Senior Rabbi of Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel since 1993. He holds a B.A. in history from UCLA and Rabbinic Ordination from Yeshiva University in New York. He studied at the Hesder Yeshiva Kerem B’Yavneh in Israel, served in the IDF’s Givati Infantry Brigade during the first Lebanon War, and studied at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

A Vice President of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California, Rabbi Bouskila also serves on the boards of UCLA Hillel, the UCLA Center for Jewish Studies, the Israel Film Festival, and as an advisor/educator for the recently founded Professional Leaders Project (PLP). A devoted activist on behalf of Israel, he was honored by the LA Israeli Community with the 2004 “Yekir Ha-Kehilla Ha-Yisraeli” (cherished friend of the Israeli Community) award.

He is a regular contributor to local and national newspapers (in both English and Hebrew), and has published an extensive commentary to the Sephardic Passover Haggadah. He teaches advanced rabbinical courses at the Academy for Jewish Religion, and has taught at Shalhevet High School, where he also coached the Girls Varsity Basketball team, leading them to 2 consecutive national tournament championships in Miami Beach, Florida.

**Rabbi Shawn Fields-Meyer**

Rabbi Shawn Fields-Meyer is founder and Executive Director of Ozreinu, a network of Torah-study/spiritual support groups for Jewish parents of special-needs children. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. She serves as Rabbi in Residence at the Milken Community High School.

She is co-author, along with Jerusalem’s Noam Zion, of the book *A Day Apart: Shabbat at Home*, and serves as Instructor in Bible at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. She also serves on the Executive Committee of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California. Rabbi Fields-Meyer and her husband, Tom, a journalist, have three sons.

**Rabbi Miriyam Glazer**

Miriym Glazer is professor of literature at the American Jewish University, where she heads the Communication Arts department and co-chairs the program in Jewish and World Civilization. An eclectic scholar whose books include the landmark collection of Israeli women’s writing, *Dreaming the Actual* as well as *Dancing on the Edge of the World: Jewish Stories of Faith, Inspiration, and Love*, Rabbi Glazer has published many essays and book chapters on Jewish literature, as well as on nature, gender, and spirituality in Judaism and Jewish culture. Her study guides and Torah commentaries have been translated into Hebrew, Russian, and Spanish; and most recently was included in the Reform movement’s new Women’s Torah Commentary.

Editor of *The Bedside Torah*, by Bradley Shavit Artson, Miriyam Glazer is currently at work on two major projects: a new translation and spiritually-oriented commentary on the Psalms of the Jewish Liturgy, written in honor of Dr. David L. Lieber, and to be published by Aviv Press next year; and her memoir, *Judaism, Wars, and Womanhood*, the writing of which has been supported by a Hadassah-Brandeis Institute grant.

Rabbi Glazer serves on the Executive Committee of the Board of Rabbis, the Publications Committee of the Rabbinical Assembly, and the Board of Directors of the newly-reconstituted Jewish Women’s Theatre.