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One People, One Book 5768

An Agnon Sourcebook

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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 and study selected works by S. Y. Agnon, the acclaimed genius of modern Hebrew literature. *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories* is a collection of stories written by Agnon, 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.

We hope that this sourcebook for *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories* will help you to understand and appreciate the literary mastery of Shai Agnon. To guide your study and gain a fuller appreciation of the richness and complexity of the author, Rabbi Daniel Bouskila and Rabbi Miriyam Glazer have prepared essays on key aspects of Agnon’s work and thought. The booklet also includes a brief biography of Agnon, the writer’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech, an article on Agnon and Shabbat, and a bibliography for further reading.

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 a companion set of self-contained lesson plans on selected stories from *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories*. We encourage you to download this important resource from the Board of Rabbis web site, www.boardofrabbis.com.

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. All of S.Y. Agnon’s stories in this book, and his other novels and short stories, are available in Hebrew. 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 as well as their fine essays. We thank as well committee members Rabbi Shawn Fields-Meyer, who also contributed lesson plans, 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
The Board of Rabbis of Southern California
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-Yisraelit” (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 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.
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Compiled and Edited by
Jonathan Freund
Cookie Lea Olshein
INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE OF S.Y. AGNON

Shmuel Yosef Agnon (Hebrew: שמעון יוסי עגנון, July 17, 1888 - February 17, 1970) was a Hebrew Nobel Prize Laureate writer and was one of the central figures of modern Hebrew fiction. His works are published in English under the name S. Y. Agnon (Hebrew: יוסי עגנון, pronounced "Shai Agnon").

Agnon was born in Galicia (now Ukraine), later immigrated as a Zionist to Ottoman Palestine, and died in Jerusalem. His works deal with the conflict between the traditional Jewish life and language and the modern world. They also attempt to recapture the fading traditions of the European shtetl (village). In a wider context, he also contributed to the narrator’s character in modern literature. Agnon was awarded the Nobel Prize jointly with poet Nelly Sachs in 1966.

Early Years

Agnon was born Shmuel Yosef Halevi Czaczkes in Buczacz, Galicia. Officially, his date of birth on the Hebrew calendar was 18 Av 5648 (July 26, 1888), but he always claimed to have been born on the Jewish fast day of Tisha b’Av, the Ninth of Av. His father, Shalom Mordechai Halevy, was ordained as a rabbi, but worked in the fur trade. He did not attend school and was schooled by his father who taught him aggadah and his mother who taught him German literature. At the age of eight, he began to write in Hebrew and Yiddish and, at the age of fifteen, he published his first poem - a Yiddish poem about the Kabbalist Joseph della Reina. He continued to write poems and stories in Hebrew and Yiddish, which were published in Galicia.

Literary Career

In 1908, he immigrated to Jaffa. His first published story was "Agunot" ("Forsaken Wives"), which appeared that same year in the journal Ha`omer. He used the pen name "Agnon," derived from the title of the story, which he adopted as his official surname in 1924. In 1910, "Forsaken Wives" was translated into German. In 1912, at the urging of Yosef Haim Brenner, he published a novella, "Vehaya Ha'akom Lemishor" ("And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight").

In 1913, Agnon moved to Germany, where he met and married Esther Marx, having a son and a daughter together. In Germany, Salman Schocken, a publisher and businessman, became his literary patron and freed him from financial worries. From that time on, his work was published by Schocken Books, and his short stories appeared regularly in the newspaper Ha`aretz, also owned by the Schocken family. In Germany, he continued to write short stories and collaborated with Martin Buber on an anthology of Hasidic stories.

In 1924, a fire broke out in his home, destroying his manuscripts and rare book collection. This traumatic event crops up occasionally in his stories. Later that year, Agnon returned to Jerusalem and settled with his family in the neighborhood of Talpiot. In 1929, his library was destroyed again, this time by riots.
When his novel “Hachnasat Kalla” (“The Bridal Canopy”) appeared in 1931 to great critical acclaim, Agnon’s place in Hebrew literature was assured. In 1935, he published “Sippur Pashut” (“A Simple Story”), a novella set in Buczacz at the end of the 19th century. Agnon’s greatest novel is generally considered to be “T’mol Shilshom” (“The Day Before Yesterday”), which appeared in 1945. The story, set in the period of the second aliyah, the wave of Jewish emigration to Palestine between 1907 and 1913, anticipated the emergence of Israel out of the Holocaust. Agnon contrasts old and new ways of Jewish life and intertwines two plots - a story of Yitzhak Kummer, would-be pioneer, and the wanderings of the dog Balak. Kummer journeys from Europe to Palestine and dies of rabies after being bitten by Balak.

Literary Prizes and Acclaim

Agnon won the Bialik Prize twice (1934 and 1950) and the Israel Prize twice (1954 and 1958). In 1966, he became the first winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature for works in the Hebrew language, sharing the prize with German Jewish author Nelly Sachs. In his speech at the award ceremony, Agnon introduced himself in Hebrew: “As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the Exile. But always I regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem.”

In later years, Agnon’s fame was such that when he complained to the municipality that traffic noise near his home was disturbing his work, the city closed the street to cars and posted a sign that read: "No entry to all vehicles, writer at work!"

Death and Legacy

Agnon died in Jerusalem on February 17, 1970. After his death his daughter, Emmuna Yaron, continued to work to publish writings from his legacy. More of his books were published posthumously than while he was alive. Agnon’s archive was transferred by his family to the National Library in Jerusalem. His home in Talpiot was turned into a museum, where the study where he wrote many of his works is preserved intact.

Agnon is considered the most researched author in Hebrew literature. A substantial number of books and articles dealing with his works have been published. Among his most outstanding scholars are Baruch Kurzweil, Dov Sadan, Nitza Ben-Dov, Dan Laor and Amos Oz. Agnon’s image has appeared on the 50 shekel banknote since 1985:

This biographical sketch is a compilation from many articles on S.Y. Agnon from the following sources: the website for the Jewish Agency for Israel, www.wikipedia.org, http://kirjasto.sci.fi/agnon.htm, and A Book that Was Lost and Other Stories, edited with introductions by Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman.
her personal memoir, Emunah Yaron, daughter of S.Y. Agnon (who edited fifteen posthumously published volumes of her father’s writings) addresses the question of her father’s religiosity and faith: “There are many who did not believe that my father was an observant Jew, even though a big black yarmulke always covered his head. There are those who said that this kippah was simply a mask, a deceiving appearance intended to fool the public into believing that he was actually a religious Jew who observed the commandments.”

What could possibly account for this wide held perception amongst many of Agnon’s readers and critics? Yaron continues: “Perhaps the lack of belief by many in my father’s religiosity stems from the fact that in reading my father’s works, they often detected in his plots and characters subtle or even overt theological speculations into religious matters, which many of his readers interpreted as outright heresy.”

What was it about Agnon’s writings that could lead so many of his readers to this seemingly bizarre conclusion about him? A look at a sampling of some of Agnon’s so-called “theological speculations” will throw light on the indeed complex issues his daughter was addressing.

In his story Tehilah, Agnon has the narrator standing at Judaism’s holiest site, the Western Wall in Jerusalem, reflecting on his feelings towards prayer and worship: “I stood at times among the worshippers, and at times among those who question.”

In the story Afar Eretz Yisrael (The Dust of the Land of Israel), the narrator proclaims:

The doubters and skeptics, and all who are suspicious of things -- they are the only people of truth, because they see the world as it is. They are unlike those who are happy with their lot in life and with their world, who, as a result of their continuous happiness, close their eyes from the truth.

In his signature story Agunot, Agnon boldly plays with a Rabbinic Midrash when describing the divorce proceedings between a couple whose marriage was arranged, and who were mismatched from the very beginning:

Our sages of blessed memory said that when a man puts his first wife away from him, the very altars weep – but here the altars had dropped tears even as he took her to be his wife.

Yom Kippur plays a central theme in Agnon’s writing, as does the harsh reality of the physical destruction of Eastern European Jewry. In his story At the Outset of the Day these two
themes come together, as the narrator and his daughter (whose home has just been destroyed) come to the synagogue on the eve of Yom Kippur. As the father tells his little daughter that they will soon bring her a “little prayer book full of letters,” he asks his daughter “And now, dearest daughter, tell me, an alef and a bet that come together with a kametz beneath the alef – how do you say them?” “Av,” my daughter answered.

The word “Av” means “father,” but it is also the name of the darkest month on the Hebrew calendar, with the most difficult of fast days, Tisha B’Av (The Ninth of Av), which mourns the tragic loss of both Temples in Jerusalem, and commemorates many other tragedies to have befallen the Jewish people. By asking the daughter to spell “Av,” Agnon is alluding to the fact that this fast day, although in name is Yom Kippur, more closely resembles the gloom and darkness of Tisha B’Av. The theological irony is that the narrator goes on to tell his daughter “And now my daughter, what father (Av) is greater than all other fathers? Our Father in heaven.” In his typically ironic fashion, Agnon employs a linguistic double entendre linking the Av in heaven (God) to the mood of Av (the destruction of the father and daughter’s home) on this Yom Kippur.

In one of his most controversial short stories, K’neged Otam Shekov’im Yeshivot Shel Ts’chok V’Kalut Rosh (Against Those Who Establish Gatherings of Laughter and Frivolity), Agnon tells of a woman who sits at home alone knitting on the Sabbath instead of gossiping with her neighbors. Moses happens to pass by her house and notices that God’s spirit hovers over the house (something only Moses can recognize). Moses is shocked to find that the woman is actually “working” on the Sabbath, violating one of the 39 prohibited Sabbath labors. He instructs her to sit with her neighbors so that she would not violate the Sabbath, yet the following week, when he once again passed by her house, he notices that God’s spirit no longer hovered above the house. Moses understood that her original practice was better, and he instructs her to return to it.

Agnon boldly challenges the notion of “violating the Sabbath,” and through the character of Moses – God’s Lawgiver – Agnon suggests that gossip is more of a legal violation of the Sabbath than are any of the 39 prohibited labors (knitting included!). This is a direct challenge to the conventional notions of religious tradition and authority, using the very figure of religious authority (Moses) to challenge the tradition from within.

Is God actively involved in the affairs of the world? Particularly, is God actively monitoring the lives of His “Chosen People”? Agnon handled this question throughout his literature, often with subtle ironic hints that smack of sarcasm and cynicism. In the story Ha-hadlakah (The Kindling), Agnon tells the story of the great pilgrimage and kindling of bonfires on the grave of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai on Lag Ba’Omer (the 33rd Day of the Omer Period). The Omer period is traditionally associated with collective rites of mourning (no shaving, no weddings or celebrations) due to the tragedies to have befallen the Jewish people during this time period (plagues, pogroms, massacres). Agnon frames the turning point of the story – when the situation starts to improve -- in sarcastic theological terms: “With the passage of time, the Holy One Blessed Be He returned His head into the place from where it was removed, and He saw what had happened in His world.”

In one of his most daring pieces of modernism, Agnon wrote a meditation on the Kaddish, the prayer recited by Jews when in mourning. The Kaddish has always been a peculiar theological concept, having the mourner praise and exalt God while weeping in grief for a departed loved one. In this Peticha L’Kadish (Introduction to the Kaddish), Agnon states:

Therefore all brothers in the House of Israel, who are gathered here in mourning, let us turn our hearts towards our Father and Redeemer in Heaven, and let us pray for ourselves – and for Him, as it were, Yitkadal V’Yitkadash Shemei Rabba...etc., etc.
Agnon places the narrator as one who is eulogizing the dead of Israel after yet another war. Following his introduction to the Kaddish, the eulogizer begins to recite the Kaddish, a praise of God, and then continues by saying “etc., etc.,” as if to say – “you know the rest, you’ve heard it so many times, I am tired of reciting it.”

There are many commentators and literary critics on Agnon’s works, but Israeli author Amos Oz is one of the rare few that dared explore Agnon’s theological ruminations. In his semi-autobiographical A Tale of Love and Darkness, Oz devotes an entire chapter to Agnon, where he writes, “Agnon himself was an observant Jew, who kept the Sabbath and wore a skullcap. He was, literally a God-fearing man: in Hebrew, ‘fear’ and ‘faith’ are synonyms. There are corners in Agnon’s stories where, in an indirect, cleverly camouflaged way, the fear of God is portrayed as a terrible dread of God: Agnon believes in God and fears him, but he does not love him.” In The Silence of Heaven: Agnon’s Fear of God, a work which Oz devoted in its entirety to investigating Agnon’s theological soul searching, Oz writes in his introduction that Agnon’s heart was “tormented by theological doubts,” and that Agnon’s characters often treat their challenges in life as “religious issues – providing that the term ‘religious’ is broad enough to encompass doubt, heresy and bitter irony about Heaven.” Oz aptly captures Agnon’s tormented religious soul, and is one of the few commentators on Agnon who refrained from looking at Agnon’s “yarmulke and observance of mitzvoth” as a “mask.” Instead, Oz recognizes that it is possible for one to observe “God’s commandments” while simultaneously struggling with that same God.

So what type of writer was S.Y. Agnon? Was he a “secular writer masked in religious garb?” Was he a “traditional Jewish writer with modernist tendencies and styles”? Emunah Yaron writes that in response to these sorts of questions, her father would respond that he is “An author of truth, who writes things as he sees them, without any ‘make-up or rouge’ camouflaging the face of things, without any décor trying to deter the eye from the core issues.”

“For these very reasons” writes Yaron, “my father – who was a religiously observant Jew – refused to join the ‘Union of Religious Writers’ in Israel.”

In the words of Amos Oz, “it is in this paradox, the tormented tension between one tenet and its opposite,” that we truly come to understand Agnon’s theological universe, that is, a world where faith and doubt were eternal roommates.
S.Y. AGNON AS JEWISH PROVOCATEUR

by Rabbi Miriyam Glazer
American Jewish University

And if my town has been wiped out of the world, it remains alive in the poem that the poet wrote as a sign for my city.
S.Y. Agnon, “The Sign”

S.Y. (“Shai”) Agnon is not an easy author to read. Most of his works have an “old-fashioned” feel – his stories unfold in a leisurely fashion, as if the writer had all the time in the world and he demands that his reader does too. Some of his stories are so interwoven with allusions, they sound as if they really must be ancient rabbinic tales – ones, though, that seem a little “off,” that seem for some reason to have gone strangely awry.

Most of all, however, Agnon’s stories are provocative. They ask us to think deeply about the Jewish past. They challenge us to consider, with sober, critical, seriousness, what “spirituality” really means. They raise difficult questions about the reality of the state of Israel – particularly in the light of the ancient ideal of Eretz Yisrael.

In short, reading Agnon raises hard questions about what it means to be a Jew today and what it means to be a Jewish writer.

Agnon & the Jewish Past

Living during the most appalling upheavals of the 20th century – the First World War I and the Second, among them – Agnon had little sentiment for the realities of history. Indeed, his stories depict relentless waves of destruction, outbreaks of the cruelest violence, experiences of poverty and suffering – culminating in the ultimate destruction wrought by the Shoah. Along with countless other villages, his own native town Buczacz was erased.

Reading Agnon’s stories thus often forces us to confront the anguish of these lost worlds, to confront a version of Jewish history painful to contemplate. Living lives or more or less comfort and relative security in contemporary California, how many of us really want to hear about the burdens of the past? Who wants to remember the terrible poverty and the endless massacres? As the most affluent and educated religious-ethnic minority in American life, is it even seemly of us to harp on our history as victims?

Yet Agnon refuses to let us forget.

“The Tale of the Menorah” describes the political vicissitudes of Buczacz, as the town is variously ruled by Poland, Austria, and Poland again and the Jews struggle to adapt: “For no one disobeys the orders of an army general; whoever does, disobeys at the risk of his life” (232), he explains.

“At the Outset of the Day” begins, “After the enemy destroyed my home…” (370).
“The Sign” opens with the phrase, “In the year when the news reached us that all the Jews in my town had been killed…” speaking of Europe; that phrase is followed by, “On the night when the Arabs destroyed my home,” speaking of Jerusalem, 1929.

Whereas for American Jews, the 20th century witnessed the drama of the mass immigration of the “tired…poor…tempest-tossed” who moved within a few decades from peddling to prosperity, from discrimination to assimilation, for the Jews of most of the rest of the world the 20th century was one of displacement, horror, war and suffering, interrupted only by the miraculous establishment of the state of Israel. To this day, the many unmarked mass graves of Jews slaughtered in the Second World War are still being discovered throughout the Ukraine. One of the few ways we have to recuperate, to honor, to re-create, to memorialize the painful past, is through literature. As Agnon writes, “if my town has been wiped out of the world, it remains alive in the poem that the poet wrote as a sign for my city” (“The Sign”). Stories keep lost worlds alive. Reading Agnon is thus a way of understanding our people’s past, acknowledging the complexities of these lost worlds, allowing the spiritual, emotional, psychic, and political toll of this history to touch us, even if we ourselves have been otherwise spared.

Agnon & Jewish Spirituality

Agnon provokes us into having to think about Jewish history – but his work does a lot more than that. Many of the stories in the collection A Book that Was Lost also challenge us to think about what we mean when we talk about “spirituality.”

I think it’s fair to say that we bandy about the word “spirituality” or at least “spiritual” pretty easily these days – walking along the beach at sunset, getting a great massage, experiencing a “revelation” -- all may be our idea of a “spiritual experience.” But Agnon’s stories ask complex, nuanced, and sometimes just plain hard questions about what being “spiritual” really is about – and what the relationship of spirituality is or ought to be to the rest of life. Stories like “Tale of the Scribe” and “That Tzaddik’s Etrog” encourage us to question spiritual or ritual devotion at the expense of family life. Other stories are so suffused with the glorious power and rhythms of the Jewish sacred year, as readers we can’t help but to ask ourselves whether we, too, feel them. “On Passover we can’t eat whatever we want,” writes Agnon, “on Sukkot we can’t eat wherever we want. But on Shavuot we can eat anything we want, wherever we want to eat it. The world is also glad and rejoices with us. The lids of the skies are as bright as the sun, and glory and beauty cover the earth” (“The Sign,” 385). When is the last time any of us felt that way on Shavuot?

Agnon & Israel & Us

Arriving in pre-state Israel during that mass immigration known as the “Second Aliyah,” Agnon befriended brilliant, intense, driven Jewish writers and idealists – but he also found himself deeply troubled by the relationship between the Diaspora he left and the new state he was dedicated to building. The story “The Book that was Lost” portrays the gulf Agnon felt between the eastern European past and the challenges of the new-state-to-be through the image of the old religious text that got lost in the mail between Buczacz and Jerusalem. What of the “old-time religion” of the past would survive the transition to a modern State? What should survive?

Agnon’s portrayal of the cultural distance between the Diaspora and Israel should provoke us into questioning our own relationship to both. What is the distance between the ideal of a homeland-of-our-own and the modern state of Israel? What is the relationship between the dream and the reality, and what can we do – can we do anything – to help dream and reality
grow closer? Do we still believe in the dream? As American Jews, do we honestly feel Israel to be our homeland? If so, why are we still here - don’t we want to “go home”?

Richly interwoven with the religious and textual tradition, troubling the Jewish past, challenging notions of spirituality, wrestling with questions about the relationship of the Diaspora and Israel, Agnon’s fiction is profoundly Jewish. Indeed, it is so profoundly so, in the end reading Agnon may force us to ponder what we usually mean when we talk about “Jewish writing.”

Usually, that term refers to “anything written by anybody (even nominally) Jewish.”

But perhaps reading Agnon will encourage us to hold our Jewish writers to a “higher standard” – a standard that defines as Jewish writing only that which truly engages core questions of Jewish life. Those questions may be religious, cultural, spiritual, historical, political, or philosophical, but whatever they may be they must come out of, reflect, and seek to contribute to, the richness of Jewish life. To borrow a line from Agnon’s “Tzaddik’s Etrog,” contemporary Jewish literature that does that would truly continue to be “a story worth hearing twice”!
Holy Land vs. Homeland: Agnon’s Israel

by Rabbi Daniel Bouskila
Sefhardic Temple Tifereth Israel

As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the Exile. But always I regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem.

S.Y. Agnon
Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, December 10, 1966

From the year 70 C.E., when Titus of Rome indeed destroyed Jerusalem and exiled Israel from its land, Jews have always longed and dreamt of returning to their Holy Land. Jewish liturgy is rich with prayers expressing the dream and hope to "Return to Zion". The Amidah, a lengthy silent meditation composed of 19 prayers (considered in Judaism the Prayer par excellence), recited thrice daily while standing in the direction of Jerusalem, contains these religious yearnings regarding Israel:

- **Sound the great Shofar of our freedom, set up the banner to gather our exiles, and bring us together from the four corners of the earth soon unto our own land. Blessed are You, Lord, who will gather in the dispersed of Your people Israel.**

- **Set Your dwelling again in the midst of Jerusalem Your city, and establish soon the throne of David. Build up Zion speedily in our days for all time. Blessed are You, Lord, who rebuilds Jerusalem.**

- **May our eyes witness Your loving return to Zion. Blessed are You, Lord, who will cause Your Holy Presence to return to Zion.**

These and many other prayers and poems, such as Judah Halevi’s "My heart is in the East and I am at the edge of the West" (written in Medieval Spain), helped create within every Jew a deeply spiritual connection to a land they had never visited. It also helped shape a fantasy about Israel within each Jew, a fantasy that depicted the land as paradise, a "Heavenly Garden of Eden on Earth." The Land of Israel was imagined as a perfect place, a spiritual remedy to the "woes of exile."

Born in the small town of Buczacz, Poland, in 1888, S.Y. Agnon grew up in a traditional Orthodox community, deeply steeped in the prayers, poems and spiritual images of the Israel depicted in the prayer book. He was also born into a Jewish world that was in the throes of a national upheaval, namely the transition from a traditional Eastern European existence to Jewish
secular Zionism with its intention to build a national Jewish homeland in the Land of Israel. It is this very polarity, the "imagined Israel" from the prayer book (Holy Land) versus the potential reality of a Jewish society living under Jewish political sovereignty in Israel (Homeland) that continuously shaped the depiction and experience of Israel in Agnon's literature.

For Agnon, the primary issue to be resolved in the Land of Israel was whether Israel would be the "abode of the spirit." Would it be possible to achieve in Israel spiritual as well as material liberation? Will this "New Israel" strike the balance between Holy Land and Homeland?

To be sure, Agnon's stories are filled with dreams, depictions and fantasies of the Holy Land version of Israel. His famous "Fable of the Goat" depicts Israel as a land with "lofty mountains, hills full of the choicest fruit, and a fountain of living waters that flowed down from the mountains" -- a virtual paradise on earth. Israel is also described as the natural spiritual abode of all Jews, so that the narrator concludes the story "On the Road" by proclaiming "I traveled by rail to the port, and from there I traveled by ship to the haven of my desire, the Land of Israel. Blessed be the Almighty who has restored me to my place."

But beyond the fantasy of Israel as imagined by the exiled Jew sitting in the Diaspora, Agnon added a new take on the "imagined vs. real" Israel. Writing from within Israel, as a new "Israeli writer" transplanted from the Diaspora, Agnon now confronted the imagined vs. real Israel dilemma from within.

A good example of this is the narrator's reflection towards the end of the story "A Book That Was Lost":

I spent a year in Jaffa before I settled in Jerusalem. In my own way I was persuaded that I was to be tested to see whether I was satisfied with Jaffa, so I was delayed there for a year until I went up to Jerusalem. Don't be surprised to hear me say so, as I consider myself worthy of being tested. But as every man who does not live in the Land of Israel is put to the test to see whether he is worthy of settling in the Land of Israel, so every man in the Land of Israel is put to the test to see whether he is worthy of settling in Jerusalem.

Within Israel, Jerusalem is symbolic of the "imagined Israel" from the prayer book, while Jaffa represents the New Israel being built by the secular Zionists. Anybody can live in Jaffa, but one must be "worthy of settling in Jerusalem." Jerusalem is the sacred, and Jaffa is the profane.

This "Holy Land versus Homeland" tension from within Israel is explored in depth in one of Agnon's masterpiece novels, Tmol Shilshom (Only Yesterday, recently translated into English by Barbara Harshav). "Like all of our brethren of the Second Aliyah, the bearers of our Salvation, Isaac Kumer left his country and his homeland and his city and ascended to the Land of Israel to build it from its destruction and to be rebuilt by it," opens the narrative voice in Tmol Shilshom, depicting in dramatic fashion Isaac Kumer's departure from the Diaspora and aliyah to Israel as an act of Biblical proportions reminiscent of Abram's first migration to Canaan. The narrator conveys Isaac's Diaspora fantasy of Israel:

A blessed dwelling place was his image of the whole Land of Israel and its inhabitants blessed by God. Its villages hidden in the shade of vineyards and olive groves, the fields...
enveloped in grains and the orchard trees crowned with fruit; the whole firmament is sky blue and all the houses are filled with rejoicing.

Too fantastic even for the narrator, he is quick to point out that "A man of imagination was Isaac, what his heart desired, his imagination would conjure up for him."

What happens to Isaac Kumer in Israel? *Tmol Shilshom* proceeds to tell a series of opposite encounters and polarized experiences. Isaac dreams of working the "land" of Israel in an agrarian settlement, but ends up as a house painter living in the city. A religious Jew who abandons his observance, he settles in Jaffa, the symbol of the "new and real Israel," yet when his Zionist dreams and fantasies are not realized or fulfilled there, he interprets this failure to mean that he has come to the wrong place in Israel. Only if he returns to living a religious lifestyle, and makes "true aliyah" to the holy city of Jerusalem, will he find the Israel of his dreams.

In both Jaffa and Jerusalem, Isaac is met with disappointments. He goes to the Land of Israel to "build the land and be built by it," only to discover that Jewish landowners prefer cheap Arab labor to Jewish workers. He goes believing that that all who immigrate to Israel are brothers bound by a common purpose (Said Isaac: "What do I need relatives for, all the Children of Israel are comrades, especially in the Land of Israel"), only to discover how easy it is to be cheated and snubbed, and how lonely life in the new land can really be. He goes dreaming of the land "flowing with milk and honey," only to discover an inhospitable land that bakes him in the blazing sun and threatens disease at every turn. Both the idealized "New Jaffa" and the fantasized "Old Jerusalem" present Isaac with a series of letdowns and disappointments, shattering the myths of his dreams and fantasies.

Agnon’s own personal identity crisis during the Second Aliyah is reflected in Isaac Kumer’s experiences. Agnon was an intellectual in a society that worshipped farmers, a writer in a culture founded on a dream of physical labor. Agnon’s son Hemdat tells the story that in 1943, his father needed his help in typing the manuscript of a large novel. Agnon was very particular about who could type his manuscripts, limiting this activity to his immediate family. With his wife ill and his daughter having just recently moved out of Jerusalem, this left Hemdat, who at the time was doing his military service in the Palmach, Israel’s elite pre-state infantry division. Agnon asked his son to request a leave from the Palmach to help his father type this large manuscript. Agnon felt that if the Palmach can grant leaves of absence to the sons of farmers in Kibbutzim and Moshavim during the harvest season, then it was entirely logical that the son of a writer can be granted a leave during the "harvest of a new piece of literature"! Agnon made his request through an official in Jerusalem, who in turn spoke to Yigal Allon, the Commanding Officer of the Palmach, who in turn spoke to Hemdat’s direct commander, a young Palmach officer named Yitzchak Rabin. Hemdat was granted thirty days leave, and spent sixteen hours a day at the typewriter. By the end of his leave, he presented to his father a fully typewritten edition of the manuscript. The name of the novel? *Tmol Shilshom*! *(Only Yesterday)* In typical Agnonic irony, the very story about how that novel came to be typewritten is itself a reflection of the novel’s plot and storyline. It is also a reflection of Agnon’s own life experiences in trying to find his place and identity in the fledgling Zionist society that came to be the modern State of Israel.

For Israelis, S.Y. Agnon the person has become an icon. Israel’s first and only writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, Israelis have canonized Agnon as a cultural hero of Zionism. His literature is studied in High School, his house in Jerusalem is a frequently visited museum, there are many schools that bear his name, and every city in Israel has a "Rechov Shai Agnon" (Shai Agnon
Street). But perhaps the currency that bears his name and image tells the story of Agnon’s ambivalence towards Zionism. Agnon appears on the 50 Shekel bill in Israel. If one may ask why the 50 Shekel bill and not the 100 Shekel bill, the "Agnonic" answer may be that only fifty percent of his heart was in Israel, while the other half was in Eastern Europe, the place of his birth and upbringing.

Agnon helped the state’s first chief Rabbis author the now famous "Prayer for the State of Israel." The words "Bless the State of Israel, the beginning of the flowering of our redemption," are his most famous contribution to this prayer. They tell the story of Agnon’s Israel – redemption has not yet come, but it is certainly now a work in progress.
Our sages of blessed memory have said that we must not enjoy any pleasure in this world without reciting a blessing. If we eat any food, or drink any beverage, we must recite a blessing over them before and after. If we breathe the scent of goodly grass, the fragrance of spices, the aroma of good fruits, we pronounce a blessing over the pleasure. The same applies to the pleasures of sight: when we see the sun in the Great Cycle of the Zodiac in the month of Nissan, or the trees first bursting into blossom in the spring, or any fine, sturdy, and beautiful trees, we pronounce a blessing. And the same applies to the pleasures of the ear. Through you, dear sirs, one of the blessings concerned with hearing has come my way.

It happened when the Swedish Chargé d'Affaires came and brought me the news that the Swedish Academy had bestowed the Nobel Prize upon me. Then I recited in full the blessing that is enjoined upon one that hears good tidings for himself or others: "Blessed be He, that is good and doeth good. "Good," in that the good God put it into the hearts of the sages of the illustrious Academy to bestow that great and esteemed Prize upon an author who writes in the sacred tongue; "that doeth good ", in that He favored me by causing them to choose me. And now that I have come so far, I will recite one blessing more, as enjoined upon him who beholds a monarch: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Who hast given of Thy glory to a king of flesh and blood. Over you, too, distinguished sages of the Academy, I say the prescribed blessing: "Blessed be He, that has given of His wisdom to flesh and blood."

It is said in the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 23a): "In Jerusalem, the men of discrimination did not sit down to dine in company until they knew who their companions were to be;" so I will now tell you who am I, whom you have agreed to have at your table.

As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the Exile. But always I regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem. In a dream, in a vision of the night, I saw myself standing with my
brother-Levites in the Holy Temple, singing with them the songs of David, King of Israel, melodies such as no ear has heard since the day our city was destroyed and its people went into exile. I suspect that the angels in charge of the Shrine of Music, fearful lest I sing in wakefulness what I had sung in dream, made me forget by day what I had sung at night; for if my brethren, the sons of my people, were to hear, they would be unable to bear their grief over the happiness they have lost. To console me for having prevented me from singing with my mouth, they enable me to compose songs in writing.

I belong to the Tribe of Levi; my forebears and I are of the minstrels that were in the Temple, and there is a tradition in my father’s family that we are of the lineage of the Prophet Samuel, whose name I bear.

I was five years old when I wrote my first song. It was out of longing for my father that I wrote it. It happened that my father, of blessed memory, went away on business. I was overcome with longing for him and I made a song. After that I made many songs, but nothing has remained of them all. My father’s house, where I left a roomful of writings, was burned down in the First World War and all I had left there was burned with it. The young artisans, tailors, and shoemakers, who used to sing my songs at their work, were killed in the First World War and of those who were not killed in the war, some were buried alive with their sisters in the pits they dug for themselves by order of the enemy, and most were burned in the crematories of Auschwitz with their sisters, who had adorned our town with their beauty and sung my songs with their sweet voices.

The fate of the singers who, like my songs, went up in flame was also the fate of the books which I later wrote. All of them went up in flame to Heaven in a fire which broke out one night at my home in Bad Homburg as I lay ill in a hospital. Among the books that were burned was a large novel of some seven hundred pages, the first part of which the publisher had announced he was about to bring out. Together with this novel, called *Eternal Life*, was burned everything I had written since the day I had gone into exile from the Land of Israel, including a book I had written with Martin Buber as well as four thousand Hebrew books, most of which had come down to me from my forebears and some of which I had bought with money set aside for my daily bread.

I said, "Since the day I had gone from the Land of Israel," but I have not yet related that I had dwelt in the Land of Israel. Of this I will now speak.

At the age of nineteen and a half, I went to the Land of Israel to till its soil and live by the labor of my hands. As I did not find work, I sought my livelihood elsewhere. I was appointed Secretary of the Hovevei Zion (Lovers of Zion) Society and Secretary of the Palestine Council - which was a kind of parliament-in-the-making and I was also the first Secretary of the voluntary Jewish Magistrate’s Court. Through these offices it was my privilege to get to know almost every Jewish person, and those whom I did not come to know through these offices I came to know through love and a desire to know my brethren, the members of my people. It is almost certain that in those years there was not a man, woman, or infant in the Land of Israel whom I did not know.

After all my possessions had been burned, God gave me the wisdom to return to Jerusalem. I returned to Jerusalem, and it is by virtue of Jerusalem that I have written all that God has put into my heart and into my pen. I have also written a book about the Giving of the Torah, and a book on the Days of Awe, and a book on the books of Israel that have been written since the day the Torah was given to Israel.
Since my return to the Land of Israel, I have left it twice: once in connection with the printing of my books by the late Zalman Schocken, and once I travelled to Sweden and Norway. Their great poets had implanted love and admiration for their countries in my heart, and I decided to go and see them. Now I have come a third time, to receive your blessing, sages of the Academy.

During the time I have dwelt in Jerusalem, I have written long stories and short ones. Some have been printed; most I still have in manuscript.

I have already told how my first songs came out of longing for my father. The beginnings of my studies also came to me from my father, as well as from the Rabbinical Judge of our town. But they were preceded by three tutors under whom I studied, one after the other, from the time I was three and a half till I turned eight and a half.

Who were my mentors in poetry and literature? That is a matter of opinion. Some see in my books the influences of authors whose names, in my ignorance, I have not even heard, while others see the influences of poets whose names I have heard but whose writings I have not read. And what is my opinion? From whom did I receive nurture? Not every man remembers the name of the cow which supplied him with each drop of milk he has drunk. But in order not to leave you totally in the dark, I will try to clarify from whom I received whatever I have received.

First and foremost, there are the Sacred Scriptures, from which I learned how to combine letters. Then there are the Mishna and the Talmud and the Midrashim and Rashi's commentary on the Torah. After these come the Poskim - the later explicators of Talmudic Law - and our sacred poets and the medieval sages, led by our Master Rabbi Moses, son of Maimon, known as Maimonides, of blessed memory.

When I first began to combine letters other than Hebrew, I read every book in German that came my way, and from these I certainly received according to the nature of my soul. As time is short, I shall not compile a bibliography or mention any names. Why, then, did I list the Jewish books? Because it is they that gave me my foundations. And my heart tells me that they are responsible for my being honored with the Nobel Prize.

There is another kind of influence, which I have received from every man, every woman, every child I have encountered along my way, both Jews and non-Jews. People's talk and the stories they tell have been engraved on my heart, and some of them have flown into my pen. It has been the same way with the spectacles of nature. The Dead Sea, which I used to see every morning at sunrise from the roof of my house, the Arnon Brook in which I used to bathe, the nights I used to spend with devout and pious men beside the Western Wall - nights which gave me eyes to see the land of the Holy One, Blessed be He-the Wall which He gave us, and the city in which He established His name.

Lest I slight any creature, I must also mention the domestic animals, the beasts and birds from whom I have learned. Job said long ago (135:11): "Who teacheth us more than the beasts of the earth, And maketh us wiser than the fowls of heaven?" Some of what I have learned from them I have written in my books, but I fear that I have not learned as much as I should have, for when I hear a dog bark, or a bird twitter, or a cock crow, I do not know whether they are thanking me for all I have told of them, or calling me to account.

Before I conclude my remarks, I will say one more thing. If I have praised myself too much, it is for
your sake that I have done so, in order to reassure you for having cast your eyes on me. For myself, I am very small indeed in my own eyes. Never in all my life have I forgotten the Psalm (131:1) in which David said: "Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty; neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me." If I am proud of anything, it is that I have been granted the privilege of living in the land which God promised our forefathers to give us, as it is written (Ezekiel 37:25): "And they shall dwell in the land that I have given unto Jacob my servant, wherein your fathers have dwelt; and they shall dwell therein, even they, and their children, and their children's children forever."

Before concluding, I would say a brief prayer: He who giveth wisdom unto the wise and salvation unto kings, may He increase your wisdom beyond measure and exalt your sovereign. In his days and in ours may Judah be redeemed and Israel dwell in safety. May a redeemer come to Zion, may the earth be filled with knowledge and eternal joy for all who dwell therein, and may they enjoy much peace. May all this be God's will. Amen.

Prior to the two speeches, Ingvar Andersson of the Swedish Academy made the following comments:

"Shmuel Yosef Agnon, Nelly Sachs - This year's literary Prize goes to you both with equal honor for a literary production which records Israel's vicissitudes in our time and passes on its message to the peoples of the world.

Mr. Agnon - In your writing we meet once again the ancient unity between literature and science, as antiquity knew it. In one of your stories you say that some will no doubt read it as they read fairy tales, others will read it for edification. Your great chronicle of the Jewish people's spirit and life has therefore a manifold message. For the historian it is a precious source, for the philosopher an inspiration, for those who cannot live without literature it is a mine of never-failing riches. We honor in you a combination of tradition and prophecy, of saga and wisdom.

Miss Sachs - About twenty years ago, through the Swedish poet Hjalmar Gullberg, I first learned of your fate and your work. Since then you have lived with us in Sweden and I could talk to you in our own language. But it is through your mother tongue that your work reflects a historical drama in which you have participated. Your lyrical and dramatic writing now belongs to the great laments of literature, but the feeling of mourning which inspired you is free from hate and lends sublimity to the suffering of man. We honor you today as the bearer of a message of solace to all those who despair of the fate of man.

We honor you both this evening as the laurel-crowned heroes of intellectual creation and express our conviction that, in the words of Alfred Nobel, you have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind, and that you have given it clear-sightedness, wisdom, uplift, and beauty. A famous speech at a Nobel banquet - that of William Faulkner, held in this same hall sixteen years ago - contained an idea which he developed with great intensity. It is suitable as a concluding quotation which points to the future: "I do not believe in the end of man."

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The annual ceremony for presenting the Nobel Prizes is held on December 10th, the anniversary of Alfred Nobel's death. In 1966, December 10 fell on Saturday—Shabbat—presenting a conundrum for Orthodox Jew S.Y. Agnon, who informed His Majesty the King of Sweden that he would not be able to attend the ceremony to receive his prize for literature until the Sabbath ended.

What are some of the challenges that arise when religiously observant Jews win the Nobel Prize? Agnon requested a room on the lowest floor of the hotel because he could not use the elevator on Shabbat.

Agnon refused to attend the Saturday morning dress rehearsal for the ceremony; he walked to synagogue instead. He said that since the literature prize is awarded toward the end, he would watch how those who preceded him behaved, and do likewise.

Back in 1966, a stretch limousine, motor running, awaited Agnon as soon as three stars appeared in the sky, signaling the Sabbath's end. Although the ceremony had started, Agnon took his time and prayed the evening ma'ariv service, made havdala marking the Sabbath's end, and lit four candles, since that year December 10th fell in mid-Hanukkah.

The holiness of the Sabbath suspends time - that voracious monster incinerating every moment of our lives - and we abstain from making preparations for post-Sabbath activities. Thus Agnon would not even get dressed in his "tails" before havdala. Finally, his limousine rushed him across Stockholm with a siren-wailing motorcycle escor. Protocol was waived and he was allowed to sit next to the chauffeur so he could plug his electric shaver into the cigarette lighter and eliminate the Sabbath growth of beard.

In his acceptance speech Agnon pronounced a blessing that few, if any, of the previous 130 Jewish Nobel prize winners uttered. Upon seeing a king of a non-Jewish nation, a Jew blesses God, saying, "Blessed is He Who has given of His glory to flesh and blood." (There are different opinions about the exact wording, depending on what type of monarch you meet.)

Agnon pronounced another blessing, incumbent upon Jews when they see secular scholars: "Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has given of His knowledge to flesh and blood."

Agnon was probably the only laureate to begin his acceptance speech with a lesson in Jewish law. "I recited in full the blessing that is enjoined upon one who hears good tidings for himself and others," Agnon said, recalling the moment when he was told he won the prize. "Blessed be He, Who is good and does good. 'Good' in that the good God put it into the hearts of the sages of the illustrious Academy to bestow that great and esteemed Prize upon an author who writes in the sacred Hebrew tongue."
A FINAL WORD

What is your favorite holy site to visit in Jerusalem? Perhaps it’s the Kotel (Western Wall)? Or a beloved synagogue or minyan? Perhaps your favorite spot is a different kind of “holy place”—a museum or memorial, a hill with a majestic view of the Old City, a favorite park or café.

For those who live in Yerushalayim, and those who visit her over and over again, the answers are probably as numerous as the stars in the heavens. Here’s my vote: The most memorable sacred place in Jerusalem is Bet Agnon, a charming house in Jerusalem’s Talpiyot neighborhood. There, Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the brilliant Israeli novelist, lived and wrote his novels and short stories. There we catch a glimpse of the milieu in which one extraordinary writer put pen to paper and produced such literary masterpieces.

There is a poignant story told of the moment when Agnon learned that he had won the Nobel Prize for Literature. His friends rushed to his home to offer their congratulations. Reporters and photographers crowded into his living room to interview the writer and to take his picture. The Prime Minister and the President of the State of Israel called to wish Agnon mazal tov. Heads of state, artists and writers from all over the world called or sent telegrams.

At one point, a photographer asked if Agnon would sit at his desk and pretend to write something so that he could take a picture of him this way. The novelist complied and wrote a few words on a tablet. After the crowd left, someone looked at the piece of paper to see what he had written.

Agnon had written five Hebrew words from U’n’l’aneh Tokef, the prayer we recite on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: Adam yesodo may-afar vesofo leh-afar. “Man’s origin is dust and his end is dust.” At the moment when he was surrounded by so much adulation, this was the simple truth that Shai Agnon felt he needed to keep in mind.

Rabbi Mark S. Diamond
APPENDIX: AN AGNON BIBLIOGRAPHY

S.Y. Agnon (1888-1970) published 24 volumes of novels, novellas and short stories. His first published story was *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, in 1912. The *Collected Works of S.Y. Agnon* was published by Schocken in eight volumes between 1953 and 1962, and was updated with the 11 works that appeared posthumously.

Some 85 of Agnon's works have been published in translation into 18 languages, including German, Yiddish, French, Spanish, Italian, Arabic, Dutch, Chinese, Japanese, Finnish, Persian, Turkish and Estonian. A complete bibliography is available from The Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature (www.ithl.org.il).

Translations into English


Critical Studies (a selection)


