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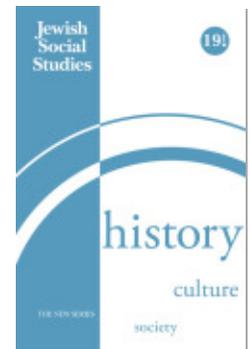
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## S. Y. Agnon's Jerusalem: Before and After 1948

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# S. Y. Agnon's Jerusalem: Before and After 1948

Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi

## ABSTRACT

*This essay explores S. Y. Agnon's Jerusalem in a number of texts, spanning nearly his entire life—and beyond, into posthumous publications. I argue that the two constitutive events of the 1940s—the Shoah and the war of 1948 that led to the establishment of the State of Israel—hardly figure in Agnon's representation of Jerusalem, which remains largely an anachronistic site of pre-1948 pilgrimage and millennial visions. Rather than interpret this as part of a seamlessly religious worldview consistent with “holistic” poetic and political positions (especially post-1967), I suggest that there is a nonhistorical version of Jerusalem as the site of ultimate reconciliation and deliverance that is often “hidden in plain view” in some of the most audacious of Agnon's fictions. I conclude with a reading of the enigmatic short story, “Ma'gelei tsedek.”*

*Keywords:* Jerusalem, Shoah, 1948, S. Y. Agnon

**A**gnon scholars have for some time been aware of a strange elusiveness regarding the Holocaust even in the historical fictions of Israel's Nobel laureate.<sup>1</sup> Close scrutiny reveals this to be part of a general circuitousness in Agnon's writing vis à vis the upheavals that radically changed the Jewish world in the 1940s. When we train our analytical lens on 1948, it is striking to see how little *Tasha"h* (the Hebrew acronym for 1948) and the political transformations it inaugurated in the “Jewish condition” figure in Agnon's fictional world. Beginning with narratives written before the Holocaust even had a name—and many years before the emergence of the triumphal dialectic that came to be known in Israel as *shoah u-tekumah* (Holocaust and rebirth)—we can, in fact, identify certain anachronizing practices that reflect an implicit resistance to identifying the events of the 1940s as constitutive of a new reality.

Agnon's most direct reflection of the unfolding catastrophe in Europe, "Ha-siman" (The Sign), was narrated in "real time": its first version was published in 1944. The story takes place on Shavuot, just after the rumor (*shemu'ah*) of the destruction of the narrator's (and author's) hometown of Buczacz, in Galicia, reached Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> Yet the story was later anthologized in a volume to which the author saw fit to add an apologia (*hitnatselut*):

The "Book of Ultimate Deeds" [one story cycle in this volume] was meant to relate the deeds of our brethren in Galicia when they lived under the auspices of the Austrian kingdom and a kind of restful peace endured—until that very Tisha be-Av 5674 [August 1914], when the Great War [*ha-milhamah ha-gedolah*] started, from which began all the troubles that have befallen all the generations in every country until the Merciful One will take pity on his world and say to our troubles: "enough."<sup>3</sup>

There is much one can say about this curious apologia, which Judaizes world time so that World War I begins on Tisha be-Av—though this stretches the Gregorian timeline only a little.<sup>4</sup> Still, the real temporal curiosity is that this appendage, written for the edition published in 1962, locates the only consequential historical event in the "Great War" and not in either the Shoah or 1948, that is, the War of Independence and the establishment of the sovereign state of Israel. More precisely, the watershed event of 1914 is marked as having given birth to all the others. This is a Jewish-accented version of the Hegelian dialectic, of what Baruch Kurzweil called "meta- (or epic) time"<sup>5</sup> or what Hillel Barzel and his generation called "historiosophia,"<sup>6</sup> in which vague historical processes, coded variously as "troubles" (*pur'anuyot*), "sorrows" (*tsarot*), and the "ravages of time" (*pig'ei ha-zeman*), and generic actors, including Nazis (*Natsiim*), Arabs (*'Aravim*), and "Ishmaelites" (*Yishma'elim*), abound<sup>7</sup> and specific historical events do not so much advance the plot as unfold from some deeper source. This mode finds its most dramatic expression in Agnon's novel *Temol shilshom* (Only Yesterday). Written as the events later referred to as the Shoah were unfolding and published in 1945–46, before any grass could grow over the mass graves of Eastern Europe, the narrative is set nearly 40 years earlier, in Palestine during the Second Aliyah. In one of its several conclusions (we know that Agnon had trouble finishing his novels<sup>8</sup>), the death of the protagonist, Isaac Kumer, from rabies is followed by a description of repeated attacks on others by the rabid dog Balak, "until the troubles of the Great War came and that trouble was forgotten" (*ad she-bau tsarot ha-milhamah*

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*ve-hishkihu otah tsarah*).<sup>9</sup> Once again, a story written proximate to World War II is located in the approaching shadow of World War I.

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Indeed, in this novel and elsewhere in Agnon's fiction, the Jewish world under the aegis of Emperor Franz Josef is Edenic and functions as the paradigmatic status quo ante: "Her earth is lush and fertile. . . . One and the same law for the Jews and for the people of the land, their well-being is our well-being, for the Emperor is a Gracious King," muses Isaac Kumer as he rides the train through the vast "realm of Austria" on the first leg of his pilgrimage to Erets Yisrael.<sup>10</sup> The emperor's death and the ensuing violence provide a consistent temporal frame for the ongoing troubles of the present: "How goodly were the days when the world was conducted according to God's will," remarks the narrator of *Oreah natah la-lun* (A Guest for the Night), "until men . . . made wars, and disturbed the order of the world."<sup>11</sup> In this novel, published on the eve of World War II and based on the narrator's (and the author's) visit to his hometown some eight years earlier, World War I assumes symbolic, even mythic significance and recasts the past in the glow of nostalgic yearnings for a lost age. But the war itself is felt less in its military effects than as a first cause—of unemployment and hunger on the home front, of dispersion and wandering, disease and bereavement; it is the source of pogroms perpetrated by returning soldiers on whatever and whoever was left in the ravaged Jewish communities. It becomes a central agent, almost a persona, in the novel, stalking through the town on active verbs: "Then the war came, took away his sons, sent his wife out of her mind, and destroyed his house."<sup>12</sup> This is the historical equivalent of the mythical state of grace and its inevitable default mode adumbrated in Agnon's debut story, "Agunot,"<sup>13</sup> and sustained as a fairly consistent structural principle throughout his career.<sup>14</sup>

That is, the inflection point of "secular history," easily incorporated into Jewish time, is August 1914. What, then, of 1948? And what of Jerusalem, the millennial center of Jewish desire and utopian reference? What of Jerusalem *within the walls*, ground zero of Agnon's imagination, rendered inaccessible to Jews by the armistice lines of 1948?

For most of his life, long before he was made an honorary citizen of the city in 1962, Agnon was recognized—and recognized himself—as the storyteller of Jerusalem.<sup>15</sup> The Agnon research database at Bar Ilan University lists more than 2,600 allusions to Jerusalem in Agnon's prose—not to mention those in his adolescent verses of conventional longing for the distant, eroticized city, written while he was still in Buczacz, some of which found their way into his later fiction.<sup>16</sup> Shmuel Werses concludes his chapter on Agnon and Jerusalem by

quoting the narrator in the posthumously published story “Lifnim min ha-homah” (Within the Wall): “And what will you respond on the Day of Judgment when they ask you: ‘Did you spend your time studying Torah?’ And I will answer, ‘I concerned myself with Jerusalem,’ and I am certain that they will say, ‘You did well.’”<sup>17</sup>

This stance took on deeper historical dimensions in Agnon’s speech at the Nobel Prize ceremony in 1966. Given that he shared the prize with Holocaust poet Nelly Sachs—and given his own preoccupation with the land of his birth and the fate of its people—Agnon’s mention of “the historic catastrophe” surely raised the expectation that he would refer to the Shoah.<sup>18</sup> But this was not the case. Rather, Agnon said,

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 . . . I saw myself standing with my brother Levites in the Holy Temple, singing with them the songs of David. . . . My father’s house, where I left a roomful of writings, was burned down in the *First World War*. . . . The young artisans, tailors, and shoemakers, who used to sing my songs at their work, were killed in the *First World War*.<sup>19</sup>

Agnon explicitly invokes two major events: the Roman destruction of ancient Jerusalem and World War I. Other constitutive events, including the Shoah, the war of 1948, and the establishment of the State of Israel, appear here, as in his fiction, mainly through synecdoche: “Of those who were not killed in the war . . . most were burned in the crematories of Auschwitz.” The Nobel speech, meant to situate the author and encapsulate his lifetime achievement, continues: “After all my possessions had been burned, God gave me the wisdom to return to Jerusalem. . . . It is by virtue of Jerusalem that I have written all that God has put into my heart and into my pen.”<sup>20</sup>

It is very tempting, of course, simply to recite the theological arc stretching from destruction to redemption, with every event in world history encoded as a major or minor footnote in that process, and to let Agnon rest in his pious pose as he appears on the 50-shekel note, the loyal scribe of eternal Jerusalem, the one who would, immediately after the Six Day War, sign the manifesto of the Movement for Greater Israel. But generations of brushing Agnon “against the grain” have shown us how shallow such a reading is.<sup>21</sup> In my own exploration of Agnon’s lifelong preoccupation with the sacred and with the challenge of approaching holiness without being consumed in its aura, I initially assumed that the war that established the State of Israel and its armistice lines—and that divided Jerusalem—would have been

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registered as a watershed event. Between 1948 and 1967, lack of access to the *Kotel* (the Wailing or Western Wall) and the occluded visibility of *Har Ha-bayit* (the Temple Mount) are the facts on the ground in Jerusalem. The evidence, however, suggests that the shift we expected between 1948 and 1967 did not really occur.<sup>22</sup> Somehow, Jerusalem itself is represented as a protean whole that contains all its synecdoches—and is always larger than the sum of its parts—while remaining portable for ritualistic and poetic purposes. Agnon accomplishes this by embracing a historical accordion that contracts and expands as needed and by proclaiming and safeguarding the autonomy of the literary enterprise.

In his work as in his public statements, Agnon resists the kind of *engagement* that was naturally expected of him and was indeed furnished by so many of his peers and predecessors, in Israel and abroad, especially after World War II.<sup>23</sup> The story Agnon submitted to *Haaretz* for the Passover issue in April 1948, published at a time when his own neighborhood of Talpiot was under siege, was a Hasidic tale with virtually no topical relevance. Gershom Schocken, *Haaretz's* editor and (following his father Zalman) Agnon's literary patron, overcame whatever ambivalence he may have felt by arguing that "especially these days, when so many in the Yishuv are despondent over the turn of events, a good story can do much to divert attention from the ravages of time [pig'ei ha-zeman] and contribute to a sense of pride over our literary achievements."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, a number of hostile events took place in Jerusalem in the months leading up to Agnon's sixtieth birthday (August 14, 1948), long before the final armistice that would put an end to the hostilities. Interviewing the author for an article in honor of his upcoming birthday, *Haaretz* columnist Azariya Rapoport (R. Azariya) asked about the reverberations of current events in his work. Although he admitted to his own strong impressions regarding the heroism of the Jewish fighters who were defending the nascent state and specifically his own neighborhood and home, Agnon refused to obligate himself to write about such actions in his fiction: "What God puts in my pen—that I will write," he told Azariya, once again asserting artistic autonomy over temporal accountability.<sup>25</sup>

Although Agnon agreed to write the official prayer for peace (*Tefilah Li-she'lo Ha-medinah*) for the newly constituted state, one suspects that he did it more for the satisfaction of being inducted as one of Israel's *paytanim*, those poets who grace the prayer books of the generations, than for any political relevance.<sup>26</sup>

In regard to the state and its apparatus, Agnon was by turns indifferent and acerbic. His satires of bureaucratic praxis are directed at a place

occasionally but grudgingly referred to as *ha-medinah* (the state). Disdain for the business of statecraft is reflected throughout *Temol shilshom* and “Perakim le-sefer ha-medinah” (Chapters from the Book of State). The latter, which dwells on a number of institutions of ha-medinah without giving it a name or specific geopolitical status, is composed of chapters written and published separately in the early 1940s, to which an introduction and the last chapter were added in 1950 when the text was published as a whole. It is speculated that the kaddish for the fallen at the end of the text was added to make some amends, so close to the war of 1948, for the satiric texture of the prose.<sup>27</sup>

But there is also the tricky matter of borders. The armistice lines of 1948 established at least the *idea* of partition. One way of avoiding this geopolitical challenge is to place narrated events in pre-1948 Jerusalem. Even the pushy Arabs and bullying Mandatory policemen can only impede access to the sacred center, which remains, nonetheless, the proximate measure of all things. The saintly Tehilah, in the story of the same name, gently chides her friend, the narrator, who lives outside the walls of the Old City:

May the day come when Jerusalem extends as far as Damascus, and in every direction. . . . But the eye that has seen all Jerusalem enclosed within her walls cannot accustom itself to viewing what is built beyond the walls as the City itself. It is true that all the Land of Israel is holy and, I need hardly say, the surroundings of Jerusalem; yet *the holiness that is within the walls of the City surpasses all else*.<sup>28</sup>

This consummate(d) story of “Jerusalem enclosed within her walls,” which belongs chronologically to the 1920s, was first published in *Maasef Davar* in 1949.

The same is true of “Edo and Enam,”<sup>29</sup> published within six months of “Tehilah” yet set in a Jerusalem hardly defined by temporal or spatial borders. The only explicit historical references are to the “Great War” and to the riots of 1929 (*pera’ot Tarpa’i*) that destroyed the narrator’s house. *The war*—ha-milhamah—is a loose signifier that in different contexts refers to World War I or to the war of 1948; the Shoah is alluded to as the Great Persecution (*ha-pur’anut*).<sup>30</sup> Such circumlocutions provide only the flimsiest of coordinates for the flights into archaic time and diasporic space that dominate the narrative. What replaces historical time and place is what we come to recognize as a requisite Edenic point of reference; but here it also provides an implicit alternative to the now-inaccessible Old City and reintroduces portability into the discourse on holy space. The home of the Greifenbachs, which anchors the

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plot and provides the narrator with shelter and a source of mystery, was built “below Damascus Gate” in one of those

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valleys of Jerusalem . . . in which all manner of blessings abide. It is as if the valleys were cut off from the settled land around them, as if they contained in their depths the whole world, . . . the stillness and repose such as one finds in the valleys of Jerusalem . . . which the good Lord hid away for lovers of tranquility.<sup>31</sup>

The anachronizing and decentering of Jerusalem persist even in the “secular” novel *Shirah*. The first chapters were published serially in the same period in which “Edo and Enam” and “Tehilah” appeared (between 1949 and 1952), but the novel was still unfinished at the author’s death in 1970. And again, although written after 1948, the narrative is set in Jerusalem of the 1930s. Manfred Herbst, neither a man of the Old City nor particularly drawn into its gravitational field, inhabits the “other temple” that would become inaccessible between 1948 and 1967 to all but military convoys: the Hebrew University, located on Mt. Scopus, from which, if bored by one’s students or colleagues, one could see “the city, the Temple Mount, the wilderness inhabited by infinite colors, the Dead Sea.”<sup>32</sup> Like Austro-Hungary under Franz Josef or the valleys of the Old City where the Greifenbachs’ house stands, such spaces can function as alternative, albeit provisional, sites of grace and tranquility. Even the contentious Hebrew University can be pacified by its view of the remote shrines.

One ostensible exception to the circumvention of events of the 1940s that enables portable sites of grace is “Kisui ha-dam” (Covering the Blood), which was published posthumously in the volume *Lifnim min ha-homah* but was written, evidently, in the early 1960s. Here we find not only the familiar allusion to World War I and many curious synecdochical allusions to the Nazis but also explicit mention of both the Declaration of the State of Israel (*hakhrazat medinat Yisrael*) and the “war between the Jews and the Arabs” (*milhemet ha-Yehudim vecha-‘Aravim*).<sup>33</sup> Yet the story’s subtitle, “bad be-vad,” (simultaneous or coterminous), with its biblical and talmudic resonances, signals the anachronizing principle that is rampant in classical Hebrew acts of representation and interpretation. Despite the acknowledgment of specific events and actors, the narrative unfurls a fairly hermetic—and somewhat incredible and inscrutable—panorama of Jewish life and death as history that is *internal but entropic* rather than teleological and messianic.<sup>34</sup> History, once again, is a Jewish accordion that collapses both time and place.

What may be most instructive in this narrative is how geographical displacement is relieved by inherited compensatory impulses; the inaccessibility of the Kotel in post-1948 Jerusalem triggers what amounts to a familiar, encoded *diasporic* reflex. An example is the description of the standard furnishings in a tiny basement apartment in Jerusalem:

Here is a table and on it a salt cellar, here is a *mizrah* [decorative wall plaque signifying the direction of Jerusalem] and on it a drawing of the Western Wall. Had we been more fortunate, we would have been praying at the Western Wall; now that we are less fortunate, we pray vis-à-vis the *mizrah* on which is the drawing of the Wall—until we will be so lucky as to pray in the Temple that will be rebuilt speedily and in our time.<sup>35</sup>

Although the narrative is set in Jerusalem, lack of access to the Kotel makes any peripheral space diasporic and instantiates diasporic practices of substitution: the *mizrah* for the Kotel and messianic projection for historical imperfection.<sup>36</sup> Further, even though proximate events and sites are mentioned, along with their ritual implications, what persists in “Kisui ha-dam,” as in so much of Agnon’s fiction written after 1948, is an avoidance of the political and even of the existential challenges of partition. Like Jerusalem painted on the *mizrah*, Agnon’s Jerusalem remains ritually, if not historically, a millennial intimation of redemption through a (healthy) dose of poetic as well as cultic substitution and mediation.

Perhaps the most curious example of the acrobatics needed to maintain this pose is the posthumously published story that gave its name to the volume *Lifnim min ha-homah*. Although this meandering tale of a man of indeterminate age meandering with a young woman “within the walls” of the Old City would surely have benefited from the author’s final touch, something peculiar—the more striking for being unedited—is revealed that may give us insight into a deeper truth of Agnon’s poetics.

In an explanatory note at the end of the volume, which she published in 1975, Agnon’s daughter and literary executor Emuna Yaron is emphatic that this story, like “Kisui ha-dam,” was written in the early 1960s: “It is clear that the story ‘Within the Wall’ was written before the liberation of the Old City, during the years when we had no foothold within the walls.”<sup>37</sup>

Agnon did indeed visit the Old City just after the Six Day War.<sup>38</sup> But from the internal textual evidence, as well as from Yaron’s claims, it is clear that he did not adjust the premises of the unpublished manuscript he had written some years earlier. We are told, repeatedly, that this

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saunter “within the walls” takes place some 52 years after the narrator—here clearly Agnon’s alter ego—arrived in Jerusalem, which would place the story in 1960. And yet it is set in a Jerusalem that is palpably pre-1948—including detailed references to all the quarters of the Old City and to such landmarks as the synagogue known as *hurvat Rebbe Yehudah He-hasid* (the ruin of Rabbi Judah the Pious)—which had been in ruins since it was first destroyed in the eighteenth century.

The narrator recognizes, at the end of his tale, that there is a small hermeneutical problem—and he does so by finally acknowledging that Jerusalem has in fact been partitioned. Instead of resolving the erotic conundrum created in the plot when his amorous advances prompt Leah, his young companion, abruptly to leave him, the narrator diverts attention to the historical inconsistency and suggests substituting a dreamscape for the realism of the narrative:

I turned the day’s events into a nighttime dream [*halom hizayon laylah*], as though all who met me with my companion were in a dreamscape, for if we wandered in the city within the walls, it means that the time was as it should be [*she-‘adayin ha-shanim ke-tikunam*] and the land was still whole and Jerusalem was not divided and any man of Israel could walk the length and breadth of the land and not fear that he would be killed. . . . What we clearly have here is a *mixing of categories* [*‘irbuw tehumim*], as happens when a man is dreaming.<sup>39</sup>

Although forms of magical realism appear in Agnon’s fiction, from the dreamscapes (or nightmares) in *Sefer ha-ma’asim* (Book of Deeds, 1932) to the sentient dog in *Temol shilshom*, apparently without disturbing the respective narrators’ peace of mind, this disruption calls for accountability. Still not satisfied with positing the whole story as a dream, the narrator of “Lifnim min ha-homah” does something he claims he has never done until now, namely, to “turn the dream into a symbol.” He goes on to provide an allegorical reading of the story: his companion represents the soul (*ha-neshamah*) and her dwelling is, as it were, “within the wall” (*lifnim min ha-homah*). The bench on which she rests is “time” (*zeman*). Finally, the companion of his companion—the narrator himself—is the body, the soul’s envelope (*nartik la-neshamah*). The kiss that he plants on her lips is, therefore, an impossible presumption of the union of body and soul, after which the soul departs.<sup>40</sup>

Whether we read this move as an intimation of mortality on the part of the aging author or merely as a sly way of getting out of the hermeneutical conundrum of a story that otherwise insists on remaining anachronistically on *this* side of the divide between the real and the fantastic—while reflecting Agnon’s often ambivalent and

ironic relation to parables and allegories—it presents at the very least an awkward exegesis of the temporal inconsistencies of a Jewish man and woman walking in the Old City in the early 1960s. It posits, once again, the *undivided city of Jerusalem* as the ultimate reference and a poetics of mediation that validates diasporic distance.

This clumsy version of a pacified Jerusalem that is otherwise timeless—and therefore unrepresentable in real time—appears in many texts written during the long course of Agnon’s life, pre- and post-1948. There is, however, a glimmer of the “perfect return” to the sacred center in a few narratives, and it is enacted through a momentary convergence of text and territory. Toward the end of Agnon’s novel of return, *Bi-levav yamim* (*In the Heart of the Seas*, 1934), the group of pilgrims reaches the Kotel in Jerusalem. “Rabbi Moshe lean[s] his head against the wall and remember[s] that he [is] standing at a spot from which the Divine presence itself had never moved.” He then recites the very verses—“the King hath brought me to his chambers” from the Song of Songs (1:4)—that his brother Gershom had begun to recite at the moment of his death (in another place and another story). But unlike his unfortunate brother, Rabbi Moshe is able to complete the verse as “the joy of the Land of Israel” fills him. This is a practical act that depends, nevertheless, on the intrusion of otherworldly grace.<sup>41</sup> The main character of this tale, Hananiah, is both the recipient and the agent of the miraculous and embodies the *geulah nisit* (redemption through miracle) that competes in our time with more practical—and broken—forms of historical redemption.

Other visions of a pacified Jerusalem are fleeting and often occluded by the noise of the quotidian. When the long-suffering pioneer-turned-housepainter Isaac Kumer, in the epic novel *Temol Shilshom*, enters the site of the Holy of Holies on the Temple Mount and comes out unscathed, it is because, unlike Agnon’s other artists and craftsmen, he is only a “smearer” (*lakhlekhan*) whose paint is formless and without iconic pretense.<sup>42</sup> When he says kaddish at the Kotel for his mother, stones and worshippers congeal fleetingly in his vision into “one mass before the Lord” (*hativah ahat lifnei ha-makom*)<sup>43</sup>—the oneness with place that is the ultimate form of *placement*. This is a messianic foreshadowing that, I have argued, “can only be glimpsed as it fades.”<sup>44</sup> If, as Ariel Hirschfeld reminds us, the renewed physical proximity of the Kotel puts us (like Isaac), in contact with our primordial, childish (mothered) self, then returning to this place pre-1948 and post-1967 with the wisdom acquired at a distance—with, I would add, the wisdom that is *distance itself*—is the “ultimate test of our maturity.”<sup>45</sup> The author himself enacted this wisdom in a poignant gesture during his first visit to the Old City

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after 1967; his biographer Dan Laor tells us that Agnon “deliberately refrained from approaching the stones of the Kotel.”<sup>46</sup>

There is one other text that both ratifies and transcends distance, providing a global and transhistorical vision of Judaism itself that can truly pacify Jerusalem, especially in a time like our own, rife with messianic drumbeats. The story “Ma’gelei tzedek” (Paths of Righteousness) was written while Agnon was in Germany and was published in 1923.<sup>47</sup> Various bundles by the author himself among “Stories from Poland” or “Stories from the Land of Israel,”<sup>48</sup> this narrative belongs to both spaces. It is, however, more than anything, a vision of a reconciled, inclusive Jerusalem as the simultaneous object of eternal yearning, impossible arrivals, and eventual redemption. The miraculous agent of this reconciliation is none other than Oto Ha-ish (That Man), the circumlocution by which the Talmud and subsequent Jewish sources designate Jesus. Oto Ha-ish makes various appearances in this story, first as a stony icon at a crossroads on a Polish country road, into whose charity box a poor, ignorant Jewish vinegar maker (Homets ben Yayin—literally, Vinegar, the Son of Wine<sup>49</sup>) unwittingly pours his life savings. On the day that he decides he has had enough of this life and tries to break the box to claim his savings and go up to the Land of Israel to die, he is caught by the priests who are coming to empty *their* box. A trial ensues during which neither side understands the other. But it is in the courthouse that the vinegar maker encounters Oto Ha-ish for the second time—this time hanging on a crucifix on the wall: “He saw the image [*ikonin*] of that man hanging on the courtroom wall and said to himself, You smile at me [*mehayekh atah bi*].”<sup>50</sup> The poor vinegar maker—now referred to as “the old man” (*ha-zaken*)—is cast into jail to rot—and it is there that he is visited nocturnally by Oto Ha-ish—this time in human form—and carried off on a three-stage flight to Jerusalem. During the flight both men turn cold and one reverts to stone; at the end, “he” falls to the earth:

The old man embraced the neck of that man as the latter turned and faced in the direction of Jerusalem. On their first flight that man stopped smiling. On their second flight the old man’s fingers turned cold. On their third flight he felt that he was embracing cold stone. His heart melted and his hands waxed weak. He was set loose and fell to the ground. On the morrow when his captors came in, he was not to be found.

That night a knocking was heard on the door of the Kotel in Jerusalem. Those who went outdoors saw a flight of angels which had come from the exile bearing a mortal form, which that very night they took and buried, in keeping with the custom in Jerusalem not to hold over the dead.<sup>51</sup>

The text resonates with passages from the Gospels, the Talmud, and later sources.<sup>52</sup> But the systematic cognitive dissonance between Jews and Christians, which accounts for the vinegar maker's ignorance, is what most commentators stress (there is a kind of cognitive dissonance also in the blindness of Jerusalem's Jews to the appearance of That Man, who is mistaken for a flight of angels). It was only Agnon's detractors—who accused him of sympathy for goyim and of extending an invitation to their savior to defile the premises of Hebrew prose—who, I believe, understood the story correctly. His defenders claim that the story is an “ironic,” grotesque, or satiric attack on Jewish faith in gentile intentions, especially after the Balfour Declaration. Following conventional lines of interpretation, Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman call “Ma'gelei tsedek” a “grotesque story” of “dubious piety,” urging an “ironic reading . . . of the old man's situation. . . . His dying vision of being embraced and then dropped by the Christian savior is an ironic and delusional extension of his ignorance and spiritual isolation.”<sup>53</sup>

What generations of readers seem to have overlooked or repressed is the appearance of the figure of Jesus—not Jesus the Christ, and not even Jesus the suffering Jew, but Jesus the compassionate one. It is he, and not the court, who enacts the ultimate justice (ma'gelei tsedek), answering the vinegar maker's prayers by transporting him to Jerusalem; Jesus provides a mode of conveyance far more miraculous than the kerchief on which Hananiah made his journey to Erets Yisrael in *Bi-levav yamim*. Not a single circle but many circles (ma'gelei tsedek) intersect here to create a porous and therefore complete reconciliation, fulfilling the vision in Psalm 23:3 of divine comfort in the face of death: *yanheni be-ma'gelei tsedek lema'an shemo* (“He leads me on pathways [lit. circles] of justice for His name's sake”).<sup>54</sup>

The history of (missed) interpretations of this story is itself a sign, I believe, of our own blindness to the unlikely agents of possible redemption in the poor city of Jerusalem. What is still lacking from Agnon's vision of reconciliation is some Muslim agent of or partner in Jewish salvation. But though there are many counterexamples of inimical Arabs enacting their ongoing strife with Jews in Jerusalem, another vision is implicit in the story “Tahat ha-'ets” (Under the Tree). Here, granted, the Muslim learns from the medieval Jews of Khibar that the land was given to the Jews. Yet at the end of the story, the narrator says, “We received from the Lord this little piece of land, not to seize kingship or to subjugate [its inhabitants], but to plow and to plant and reap, to keep the Lord's laws and preserve his teachings.”<sup>55</sup> This seems to be a paraphrase of Maimonides' vision of peace at the conclusion of his magisterial *Mishneh Torah*:

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The sages and prophets did not long for the days of the Messiah that Israel might exercise dominion over the world, or rule over the gentiles, or be exalted by the nations. . . . Their aspiration was that Israel be free to devote itself to the law and its wisdom, with no one to oppress or disturb it, and thus be worthy of life in the world hereafter.<sup>56</sup>

In conclusion, I would submit that, rather than interpret such stories as part of a seamlessly messianic-religious worldview consistent with holistic poetic and political positions (especially post-1967), we discern in them an ahistorical version of Jerusalem as the site of ultimate reconciliation and deliverance that is “hidden in plain view” in some of the most audacious of Agnon’s fictions. I hope I shall be forgiven for brushing these fictions against the grain in the name of a Jerusalem at peace, within and beyond the walls, and of a vision of interlocking and ever-expanding circles of justice and compassion to supplant acts of subjugation and oppression in the Holy Land.

## Notes

All translations from Hebrew are mine unless otherwise noted. For enlightening comments and references, especially on the enigmatic story “Ma’gelei tsedek,” I am indebted to Ari Elon, Michal Arbell, and Bat-Nadiv Weinberg. I also wish to thank Mati Senkman for his sensitive readings and careful detective work.

- 1 See Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, “Agnon Before and After,” *Prooftexts* 2, no. 8 (1982): 78–94.
- 2 S. Y. Agnon, “Ha-siman,” in *Ha-esh veba-etsim* (Jerusalem, 1972), 283; Eng. trans., “The Sign,” in *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories*, ed. Alan Mintz and Ann Golomb Hoffman, trans. Arthur Green (New York, 1995), 378. I have modified the English translation, which renders *shemu’ah* as “news.” The story was first published in *Moznayim* in 1944 and later revised for inclusion in *Ha-esh ve-ha-etsim*.
- 3 S. Y. Agnon, “Hitnatslut,” in *Ha-esh veba-etsim*, 336.
- 4 August 1, 1914, which corresponded that year to Tisha be-Av, was the day that Germany declared war on Russia. If we add to this the resonances of the Akedah (the binding of Isaac, Genesis 22), the primary archetype of Jewish memory, in both the title of the collection, *Ha-esh veba-etsim*, and the first story, “Lefi ha-tsa’ar ha-sakhar,” the Jewish lens on world history comes into even sharper focus.
- 5 Kurzweil uses this term frequently. He considers both *Oreah natah lalun* and *Temol shilshom* to be “epic novels” (*yetsirot epiyot*). Baruch

- Kurzweil, "Temol shilshom: 'Al Balak, ha-kelev ha-demoni," in *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: Mivhar maamarim 'al yetsiroto*, ed. Hillel Barzel (Tel Aviv, 1982), 216.
- 6 See Hillel Barzel, *Hayim Nahman Bialik, Shmuel Yosef Agnon: Mehkar u-feirush* (Tel Aviv, 1986), 193–208.
- 7 See, for example, references to pig'ei ha-zeman and to Natsiim in the posthumously published story "Kisui ha-dam o bad be-vad," in *Lifnim min ha-homah* (Jerusalem, 1975), 53, which I will discuss below.
- 8 See, on this, Dan Miron and Naomi B. Sokoloff, "Domesticating a Foreign Genre: Agnon's Transactions with the Novel," *Prooftexts* 7, no. 1 (Jan. 1987): 19, 25–26.
- 9 S. Y. Agnon, *Temol shilshom* (Jerusalem, 1971), 606; Eng. trans., *Only Yesterday*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton, 2000), 640.
- 10 Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 20.
- 11 S. Y. Agnon, *Guest for the Night*, trans. Misha Louvish (New York, 1968), 275.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 55. For an elaboration of this idea, see Ezrahi, "Agnon Before and After," 81.
- 13 The title of Agnon's first Hebrew story, "Agunot," untranslated in the English version, means "abandoned wives"—a halakhic term that has many resonances in Agnon's later fiction.
- 14 Hillel Barzel describes the "historiosophical" paradigm of Agnon's work as "'completeness, sickness, wholeness,' distinguished from the classical tragic structure where the source of decay is either in the character's sinful act or in the inexorable process of 'growth, consolidation, and entropy'"; Barzel, *Hayim Nahman Bialik, Shmuel Yosef Agnon*, 197.
- 15 When he was made an honorary citizen of Jerusalem, Agnon responded: "My heart tells me that the letters of the holy tongue recommended me because I use them to write Jerusalem's praise, and I achieved greatness because of the honor of Jerusalem"; Dan Laor, *Hayei Agnon: Biyografiyah* (Jerusalem, 1998), 525.
- 16 For example, "My life, my spirit and my soul / I would give for you, Holy City / Awake and asleep, [I would relinquish] the peak of my happiness / my holidays and the pleasures of Sabbath and the New Month"; Shmuel Werses, *S. Y. Agnon ki-feshuto: Keriah bi-khetavav* (Jerusalem, 2000), 291. The database referred to by Werses is a research project on Agnon not available to the general public.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 300.
- 18 Amos Oz opens his meditation on Agnon's theodicy with this expectation; *The Silence of Heaven: Agnon's Fear of God*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton, 2000), 2–3.
- 19 [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1966/agnon-speech.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1966/agnon-speech.html); emphasis added.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Even Hillel Barzel rejects the common "assumption that the Agnon story aspires essentially to messianic wholeness, probability, and hope

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- [*ha-shelemut, ha-sikui ve-ha-tikvah ha-meshihiyim*]; on the contrary, the Agnon story, which exists mainly in its occluded layers, places at the forefront historical time in its distorted pathways, seemingly unredeemable, with only the slightest hint of the promised afterlife"; Barzel, *Hayim Nahman Bialik, Shemuel Yosef 'Agnon*, 201. The ongoing discussion of "weak messianism" inspired by Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and others might find an unlikely ally in this reading.
- 22 All such claims are, of course, provisional. Dov Sadan may have been the first of Agnon's contemporaries to insist on the tentative nature of every hermeneutic act and to suggest, slyly, that every commentator include an admonition to both himself and his readers: "*lefi sha'ah*" (for the time being, provisionally); Dov Sadan, *'Al S. Y. 'Agnon: Masah, 'iyun ve-heker* (Tel Aviv, 1973), 66. See also Nitza Ben-Dov, *Ahavot lo meusharot: Tiskul eiroti, omanut u-mavet bi-yetsirat 'Agnon* (Tel Aviv, 1997), 377–80.
- 23 The debate over "engaged" versus "autonomous" literature was inaugurated in postwar Europe by the impassioned exchanges between Jean-Paul Sartre and Theodor Adorno.
- 24 The story, called "Sheloshah shavu'ot," was published in *Haaretz* on April 23, 1948; for this reference and Schocken's remarks, see Laor, *Hayei 'Agnon*, 398, 687.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 402–3.
- 26 For an account of Agnon's contacts with Israel's chief rabbi Yitzhak Herzog and the composition of the prayer, see Laor, *Hayei 'Agnon*, 406–8.
- 27 S. Y. Agnon, "Perakim le-sefer ha-medinah," in *Samukh ve-nireh* (Jerusalem, 1971), 250–89.
- 28 S. Y. Agnon, "Tehilah," in *Firstfruits: A Harvest of Twenty-five Years of Israeli Writing*, ed. James A. Michener, trans. Walter Lever (Philadelphia, 1973), 39; emphasis added. See Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley, 2000), 237–38.
- 29 S. Y. Agnon, "'Ido ve-'Einam," in *'Ad Henah* (Jerusalem, 1972), 343–95; Eng. trans., "Edo and Enam," in *Two Tales by S. Y. Agnon: Betrothed and Edo and Enam*, trans. Walter Lever (New York, 1966), 141–233.
- 30 In "Edo and Enam," Agnon mentions the riots of 1929 (144) and the British "curfews" and the Mandate (156) as recurrent memories. One curious allusion to "the war" probably refers to World War II: "A good many lands are no longer accessible, for since the war the world has closed in on us and the countries that admit tourists are fewer in number" (143–44); in another place, "the war" probably refers to the war of 1948: "a young fellow . . . comes back after the war. He needs a roof over his head and can't find one" (153). Finally, toward the end of the story, the "Great Persecution" (192) most likely alludes to the Shoah.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 184, 157, 159.
- 32 S. Y. Agnon, *Shirah*, trans. Zeva Shapiro (New York, 1996), 103.
- 33 Agnon, "Kisui ha-dam," 69, 71–72, 95.
- 34 See, on this, Ezrahi, "Agnon Before and After," 90–93, and Barzel, *Hayim Nahman Bialik, Shemuel Yosef 'Agnon*, 204: "In the final analysis,

- the historical process is determined by internal [Jewish] forces and by divine will.”
- 35 Agnon, “Kisui ha-dam,” 86.
- 36 For an elaboration of diasporic cultic and aesthetic practices, see Ezrahi, *Booking Passage*, 3–23, 234–41.
- 37 Emuna Yaron, “Al ha-sefer,” postscript to Agnon, *Lifnim min ha-homah*, 271.
- 38 Laor, *Hayei ‘Agnon*, 611.
- 39 Agnon, “Lifnim min ha-homah,” 49.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 49–50.
- 41 S. Y. Agnon, *In the Heart of the Seas*, trans. I. M. Lask (New York, 1947), 116. See Ezrahi, *Booking Passage*, 81–102.
- 42 Agnon, *Temol shilshom*, 71, 219–20; Eng. trans., *Only Yesterday*, 70–71, 227–28.
- 43 Agnon, *Temol shilshom*, 351; Eng. trans., *Only Yesterday*, 369.
- 44 Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, “Sentient Dogs, Liberated Rams, and Talking Asses: Agnon’s Biblical Zoo, or Rereading *Temol shilshom*,” *AJS Review* 28, no. 1 (Apr. 2004): 119; see also 122–23.
- 45 Ariel Hirschfeld, *Reshimot ‘al makom* (Tel Aviv, 2000), 15.
- 46 Laor, *Hayei ‘Agnon*, 611.
- 47 S. Y. Agnon, “Ma’gelei tsedek,” *Ha-‘olam* 11 (1923): n.p.
- 48 In preparation for his fiftieth birthday (in August 1938), Agnon suggested collecting a number of stories—including “Ma’gelei tsedek”—under the rubric “Sipurei Erets Yisrael”; see Laor, *Hayei ‘Agnon*, 155, 302. But the story appears in the collection *Elu ve-elu* in a section entitled “Polin: Sipurei agadot”; S. Y. Agnon, *Elu ve-elu* (Jerusalem, 1971), 383–88.
- 49 See references to Homets ben Yayin in the Talmud (b. *Bava Metsia* 83b) as signifying not only economic but also moral degeneration (for example, the son of Shimeon bar Yohai).
- 50 Agnon, “Ma’gelei tsedek,” 387; Eng. trans., “Paths of Righteousness, or The Vinegar Maker,” in Mintz and Hoffman, *Book That Was Lost*, trans. Amiel Gurt, 196. The word *hiyukh* (smile) in Talmudic Hebrew, like *tsehok* (laughter) in biblical Hebrew, has many connotations, from benign countenance to scorn (see b. *Bava Kama* 117a; b. *Eruvin* 48a). That Man smiles benignly twice more in Agnon’s story, when he appears in the old man’s jail cell and prepares him for his transport to Erets Yisrael (Agnon, “Ma’gelei tsedek,” 388; Eng. trans., “Paths of Righteousness,” 197). The smile stops on the first of the three flights.
- 51 Agnon, “Ma’gelei tzedek,” 388; Eng. trans., “Paths of Righteousness,” 197.
- 52 Jesus is offered vinegar during his crucifixion. See John 19:29; Matthew 27:34; Mark 15:36. For resonances with chains and flights, see Acts 12:6–10.
- 53 Mintz and Hoffman, *Book That Was Lost*, 165. Hillel Barzel claims that “because of its enigmatic quality, the story was mistakenly read as ascribing redemptive power to the Messiah of the gentiles. [But] the story

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explicitly points to the mortal danger in the old man's mistake. Judaism's connection to Christianity did not work in the Jews' favor, especially when the Jews tried to see in it the justice, love, and grace that Christianity claims for itself"; Barzel, introduction to *Shemuel Yosef Agnon: Mivhar maamarim 'al yetsirato*, 106. Neta Stahl is perhaps the most sensitive of the current generation of critics; her discussion of the story appears in a volume devoted to the figure of Jesus in modern Hebrew literature. However, she too argues that although the narrative focuses on the "constructed" image of Jesus (Jesus as icon at the beginning and again as "stone" at the end) and on the exegetical conundrum created when both sides systematically misunderstand each other, in the end this is another instance of Agnon's trifling with his readers ("meta'tea' banu"); Neta Stahl, *Tselem yehudi: Yitsugav shel Yeshu ba-sifrut ha-ivrit shel ha-meah ha-esrim* (Tel Aviv, 2008), 97; Eng. trans., *Tzelem: The Figure of Jesus in Modern Jewish Culture* (Oxford, 2011). For the most extensive "defense" of the story as a "political social satire," including much of the history of the critical reception during Agnon's lifetime, see Ariela Abramson, "Be-ma'gelei tsedek," *Yerushalayim: Shenaton le-divrei sifrut ve-omanut* 5–6 (1971): 88–103. Among the curiosities Abramson cites that show how consequential Agnon's fiction was for that generation are the various storms the story created when it first appeared in 1923 and again when it was anthologized in 1953. Kurzweil, Abramson says, did not know what to make of it. Rabbi Herzog met with Agnon; Dov Sadan, one of that generation's most sophisticated readers, claimed that Agnon was "flirting" with That Man ("yesh bo mi-shum mizmut 'im oto ha-ish"); Abramson, "Be-ma'gelei tsedek," 88. For a suggestive parallel with the iconic and then animated representations of the Holy Family (though with a crucial gender difference)—as well as the evocation of an eastern European landscape whose crossroads are marked by such icons—see Leah Goldberg's poem, "Madonot 'al parshat derakhim," in *Taba'ot ashan* (Tel Aviv, 1935), 27. I am grateful to Zohar Weiman-Kelman for calling this poem to my attention.

- 54 Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, 2007), 78. See the discussion of ma'gelei tsedek from Psalm 23 in the work of R. Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michal Weiser (known as Malbim): "be-ma'gelei tsedek is the circular way that one moves until one achieves one's goal [*ha-derekh ha-sibuvi be-igul 'ad she-yagia' el mehoz heftso*], that is, if I have strayed from the straight and narrow into a circular path, it was a circle [detour] for the sake of righteousness"; R. Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michal Weiser, *Otsar ha-perushim 'al tanakh ve-mikraot gedolot le-Meir Leibush Ha-malbim*, 4 vols. (Jerusalem, 1956), 4: 313.
- 55 S. Y. Agnon, "Tahat ha-'ets," in *Elu ve-elu*, 461.
- 56 *Hilkhot malakhim* 12:4, cited in Joel Kraemer, *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization's Greatest Minds* (New York, 2008), 356.