

20

AT THE CENTENARY OF AGNON'S "VE-HAYAH HE'AKOV LE-MISHOR"

A New Reading

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The angel of historiography, unlike Walter Benjamin's dour angel of history, challenges us to wrest meaning out of an examination of historical events. While Benjamin's angel was inspired by a painting of Paul Klee, the angel of historiography I allude to derives from a more familiar locus: Genesis 32:23–33 and its many commentaries. The angel of historiography may struggle fiercely, but might finally yield insight. In our study of historical events, we might choose to study a movement, a period, or, if we are so attracted, a person whose deeds or writings intrigue us. David Ellenson, in his pervasive fascination with the transition from tradition to modernity in the religious life of Jews, was intrigued by the figure of Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer, a paragon of modern Jewish orthodoxy who both served as a community rabbi and founded the Orthodox Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin in 1873. Hildesheimer's activities as an active community rabbi and a leading educator-scholar provided Ellenson with a perfect subject for his interests in the sociology of religion, as well as in the dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity.

Intrigued by similar historical phenomena, but temperamentally attracted to literature more than the history of religion, I found my avatar in the Hebrew author Shmuel Yosef Agnon, who fused modern prose fiction with the Hasidic tale and dominated Hebrew prose fiction for the first half of the twentieth century, and even beyond his death in 1970. A comparison of Hildesheimer with Agnon regarding the historical transition from tradition

to modernity is illuminating since for Hildesheimer this historical transition generated a dialectical, existential situation in which he had practical problems to solve, legal decisions to make, institutions to create, while for Agnon this dialexis became instrumental. It provided him with a framework in which to create his fictions. He employed his prodigious knowledge of Hebrew texts of all periods to create a style that, though linguistically traditional, could convey the complex concerns of a modern writer that were often expressed in ambiguities and ironies.

His penchant for ambiguities, embodied in the characteristic Agnonic style first adopted in his novella "Ve-hayah he'akov le-mishor" ("And the Crooked Will Become Straight," 1912) was both his vehicle for dealing with the tensions between tradition and modernity that obsessed him, and for creating fictions that embodied these concerns.¹ In the current year, the centenary of this masterly story is being celebrated in Israel, and I will take this opportunity to offer some reconsiderations of this pivotal story in the light of the tradition/modernity dialectic. I call this story pivotal since, as I have documented in my book on Agnon, in his first stories published between 1903 and 1911, he was clearly searching for a contemporary narrative style of Hebrew to tell his stories.² In late 1911 he adopted a style that fused traditional texts of all previous periods of Hebrew writing to tell his stories. "Ve-hayah he'akov le-mishor" is the first story written in that style, which critics have subsequently called Agnonic. Written in Jaffa, where Agnon had been living as of 1908, it was published by Yosef Hayyim Brenner first in the journal *Ha-po'el ha-tsa'ir* and then as a separate volume in 1912. And while Agnon either scrapped or relentlessly rewrote stories he had published before 1912, his editing of "Ve-hayah he'akov le-mishor" for later editions of his works, though significant, is relatively minimal. Obviously, this early story (he was twenty-four when he wrote it) still met the approval of this notoriously self-critical writer decades after its first publication. Ironically, while it is a seminal work in modern Hebrew literature, it has not yet been translated in full into English, though it was published in German as early as 1918 by Max Strauss.

My own preoccupation with this novella goes back more than fifty years. More recently, I have been intrigued by the implications of a collection of major essays on this novella edited by Yehudah Friedlander in 1993.³ Much significant, productive work has been done, mostly on studying the rich sources of the novella and trying to determine their implication for the understanding of the story. The interpretations of the story have become more complex; among the twelve essays in this collection, one finds at least six

or seven distinct interpretations. Why, I wonder, are there so many different interpretations of this text? This hermeneutic profusion is generated, I would argue, by the unique narrative style and stance Agnon adopted in writing this novella, which differs radically from anything he had written before late 1911. My own reading of this story has also become more complex in that I am now more convinced than ever that a proper reading of this story and much of Agnon's subsequent writing must begin with a concentration on the author and his manipulation of his readers' responses by using the dialectic between tradition and modernity as an expressive instrument.

To focus on the choice of style he made in writing this novella, I bring a statement made by Agnon and quoted by the Hebrew author Yehoshua Radler-Feldman, known as Rabbi Binyomin: "I tell you, Rabbi Binyomin, that Mendele's style is not the last word in Hebrew fiction."⁴ In this retrospective article written in 1933, the addressee of this statement, Rabbi Binyomin, recalls his meetings with Agnon in Jaffa in 1908–11, when both were young, aspiring writers. In one memorable scene, the two were walking along the Mediterranean shore when Agnon protested that Mendele, for all his monumental stature, was not "the last word in Hebrew fiction." Agnon was obviously referring to the publication of the collected Hebrew fiction of Mendele that began to appear in 1909 and was the obvious challenge to an ambitious young writer who wanted to make his mark in Hebrew fiction. The author Rabbi Binyomin, recording this event after Agnon had published the four volumes of the first edition of his collected works in 1931, implies that Agnon had indeed succeeded in forging a new prose idiom in Hebrew, something that transcended Mendele.

There are at least two features of Agnon's narrative technique in "Ve-hayah he'akov le-mishor" that differ from that of Mendele. First, while Mendele does employ Hebrew of all periods, in contradistinction to the biblically oriented Hebrew of Avraham Mapu, for instance, he is trying to create a narrator who is a modern person. Agnon, in "Ve-hayah he'akov le-mishor," creates a narrator who talks to us in a Hebrew style evocative of the Hasidic raconteur. The Hebrew style has all the distinctive charm of the naïve, pious raconteur. Second, while Mendele's narrator is not too interested in psychological motivation, the narrator of "Ve-hayah he'akov le-mishor" is profoundly obsessed by his hero's emotions and thoughts. Agnon learned this obsession both from the neo-romantic German and Scandinavian writers of the period and from the Hebrew fictions of Micha Yosef Berdichewski and Yosef Hayyim Brenner, the dominant author in Jaffa of that period and a close friend. Here it is crucial for us to distinguish between the author S. Y. Agnon and the narrator he created

to tell his tale. For, while the narrator is a quasi-naïve Hasidic raconteur, the author is a skillful manipulator of plot, tone, and the creation of character. This novella is thus both traditional and modern, and the reader is constantly challenged to interpret which mode of discourse—if any—is dominant. In fact, Agnon's ambiguities and ironies are the predominant aspects of the game he plays with his readers, who are expected to participate in this interpretive contest.

The name of the novella is, itself, a challenge. The title comes, obviously, from Isaiah 40:4:

Let every valley be raised,
Every hill and mound made low,
Let the rugged ground become level
And the ridges become a plain.

The third stich here, in Hebrew "ve-hayah he'akov le-mishor" is translated in the JPS translation as "Let the rugged ground become level," but is rendered in the King James as "And the crooked shall be made straight." Agnon's implied and actual Hebrew reader knew this verse well since it is chanted in the synagogue on the Sabbath after Tishah Be-Av, the Sabbath named after this portion of the prophets, "Shabbat Nahamu." This stirring prophetic verse from Isaiah heralds the return to Zion in 538 BCE after the Babylonian Exile and evokes cosmic yearning for national redemption. It is used here, however, as the title of a tale about the financial ruin and social decline of a shopkeeper, Menashe Hayim; his extreme personal suffering; and his somewhat questionable redemption at the end of the novella. From the very title of the novella, one begins to wonder what Agnon actually means.

This is evident from the very first lines that mock the naïve content heading of certain Hasidic tales that summarize and comment on the story we are about to read, often offering the moral lesson the reader is supposed to derive. The brief summary is expanded in the narrative text. The protagonist, Menashe Hayim, a pious Hasidic shopkeeper, a *kohen*, lives happily with his wife, Kreyndel Tcharne, in Buczacz, Galicia (Agnon's hometown). As in a typical folktale, their happiness is marred by one failing: they have no children, and thus, Menashe Hayim has no prospects for posterity, a serious lacuna in the life of a pious man. Their love, however, is deep, portrayed in detail, and Menashe Hayim would not consider divorcing his wife even though, by Jewish law, he could do so since she had not born him children after ten years

of marriage. In addition, when another shopkeeper opens a shop across the street from Menashe Hayim's store, he is financially ruined by his competitor. One would expect that Menashe Hayim, a pious man, would be redeemed somehow from this difficulty through his deep piety, but this is Agnon's story, not one of the uplifting tales of the Besht (the spiritual founder of Hasidism). In the spirit of the nineteenth-century realistic novel, the author devotes much attention to his hero's financial, and hence social, decline. Menashe Hayim has no money to restock his shop, no credit from his suppliers, and decides to try to solicit alms from individuals in other towns. This fateful decision was motivated by the couple's refusal to have Menashe Hayim earn his living as a *melamed* (a teacher of young boys), which he could have done since he was a learned man; that lowly profession would imply a significant loss of status in the community. Armed with a letter of recommendation from his rabbi, he leaves home to seek donations from individuals in other towns. His wife is forced to set up a stall in the Buczacz town market to earn enough to support herself. Due to Menashe Hayim's financial decline, the hero loses everything: his shop, his home, his status in town, his family life.

As a man of self-respect, Menashe Hayim has to adapt himself to the life of a beggar, which Agnon describes in painful detail. After a while, he stops writing to his wife and stays on the road well after the anticipated period he had set for himself. Bit by bit, he collects enough money and, overcome by yearning for his wife, he decides to return home. At that point, he meets a beggar who offers him a huge sum of money for the letter of recommendation from his rabbi. Figuring that he no longer needs the letter, Menashe Hayim succumbs and thus sells away his identity, clearly the cardinal sin he commits in this novella. Before returning home, he decides to visit the fair at Lashkovits to buy goods to restock his shop in Buczacz. The author constructs the fair as a grotesque Walpurgis Night. Menashe Hayim, inflamed by all he saw there, takes a room in an inn, eats a sumptuous meal, including much liquor. When he awakes from his stupor in the morning, he finds himself thrown out into the street, bereft of both his wallet and his phylacteries. Totally disconsolate, he has no alternative but to return to the road to resume his life of beggarmod, but this time without the rabbi's letter of recommendation.

While Menashe Hayim is back out on the road, Agnon adds drama to the story by having the beggar who bought the letter die in a fit of drunkenness. When bystanders happen onto the letter he bought from Menashe Hayim, they assume that its original owner is dead and relay the news back to Buczacz. Agnon thus generates a crucial situation of mistaken identities, for if Menashe

Hayim is dead, and his death can be certified, then his wife Kreyndel Tcharne is a widow. She remarries and, shortly afterward, bears a child—exactly what she was unable to do during her marriage with Menashe Hayim, when she was considered barren. She has no idea that her first husband, whom she still loves, is in fact alive, nor that she is actually illegally married and her child is a bastard. Agnon, for his part, assumes that his readers know that this situation violates traditional Jewish law, and they are thus drawn into a suspenseful situation. Menashe Hayim has no clue of what has transpired and continues on his way, begging for alms. Finding no success on the road, for he has no letter of recommendation, he decides to return home to the woman he loves. When he reaches Buczac, people do not recognize him, since he has been begging on the roads for years. Meeting a group of children, he learns from them that they are going to the celebration of the impending circumcision of the child of Kreyndel Tcharne. Hearing this, Menashe Hayim is thoroughly shocked; he runs out of town, and falls to the ground crying.

Agnon's reader knows that Menashe Hayim is faced with an impossible dilemma: if he were to go home, he would ruin his wife's life and disgrace her child. He could, furthermore, not remarry her since he was a kohen and could not marry a woman in such marital circumstances. But if he did not go home, he would be allowing her to live in sin. Agnon thus creates a peculiar narrative situation by crafting a complicated version of the predicament of the *agunah*, the "anchored" or "chained" wife whose husband has disappeared, left her without a *get* (a bill of divorce) and thus rendered incapable of remarriage. The hero hides in forests and cemeteries lest he be discovered and wanders from place to place hoping to die. This, for him, is the only solution, though as a pious Jew, he is prohibited from committing suicide. As his strength begins to fail him, he comes upon a cemetery where the guard befriends and feeds him. One day he notices the guard, who also served as a stone carver, engraving a handsome stone with the name "Menashe Hayim" on it. Hearing from the guard that it was ordered by a lady for the headstone of a certain beggar, her husband, Menashe Hayim, our Menashe Hayim realizes that it was Kreyndel Tcharne who ordered the stone for him, since she thought he was dead. Menashe Hayim finally confesses his story to the guard. Shortly afterward, he dies happy in the thought that his wife still loved him and that he had resisted the temptation to reveal the truth and ruin her life. When he dies, the guard places over his grave the stone ordered by his wife for the other grave that she thought was his. Though childless, his name was not forgotten among his people, since his wife would come to weep over his grave.

Agnon ends his story with the five letter Hebrew acronym one finds on a traditional gravestone: Tav. Nun. Tsadi. Bet. Heh. “May his soul be bound with the bond of the living.” This acronym, more prominent in the 1912 edition than in later editions, is an apt closing for a pious text written in the style of a Hasidic tale. Eliezer Meir Lifshitz, one of the first literary critics to publish an article about this story, as early as 1912, complained about the dissonance of this ending: Menashe Hayim is given a happy ending, a proper burial even though his reticence allowed his wife to live in a sinful marital status. Lifshitz, significantly, had been Agnon’s literary editor and mentor in Buczacz “before Agnon became Agnon” and when he still published under his original name, Czaczkes. Lifshitz clearly understood the responsibility of the author of this story.

The novella begins with a title that raises questions (can it apply to Menashe Hayim’s story?) and ends with an epitaph that is more than ambiguous (can Menashe Hayim be considered virtuous, or blessed at the end of the story?) The reader must recognize that any simple reading will not suffice. The hero’s name is Menashe Hayim (he makes forgotten/erases life) while his wife’s name is Kreyndel Tcharne (black crown). Even the brief summary of the story I have presented above should alert the reader to the author’s artful plotment of the novella with its surprising turns, mistaken identities, and legal complications. While the well-wrought ambience is that of traditional pious Jews in the middle of the nineteenth century, the skillfully charted financial decline of the hero, his accompanying social degradation, his deep, detailed love for his wife, his psychological anxieties, are all evidence of a modern sensibility. Similarly, a close study of the text, beyond the scope of this paper, but well documented in several of the essays in the Friedlander volume, offers abundant evidence of pervasive authorial manipulation. The attentive, competent reader is intrigued by the pervasive play with traditional texts to express very modern sentiments, a narrative technique so persistent as to call attention to the presence of the author in every line. The reader is thus consistently engaged with Agnon’s fusion of the traditional with the modern and challenged to interpret the rich complexities emerging from the story’s many ambiguities.

While such critics as Yosef Hayim Brenner and Fishel Lachover praised the novella effusively upon its publication, such luminaries as Michah Yosef Berdichevsky and Hayim Nahman Bialik found it too mannered. Agnon himself had the good sense to know when to modify this style. In the novel *Hakhnasat kalah* (The Bridal Canopy, 1931), which takes place in Galicia of the early

nineteenth century, he returns to this quasi-Hasidic style, but in the novel *Sipur pashut* (A Simple Story, 1935) set in the early twentieth century, he forged a style that exploits many of the rabbinic or Hasidic locutions, but does not sound like an intertext of a Hasidic tale. His awareness that the style of his first great novella, "Ve-hayah he'akov le-mishor," could not be used for all situations is added evidence that he knew that the stylistic fusion of the traditional and the modern offered the writer a rich variety of creative possibilities.

Notes

1. S. Y. Agnon, *Ve-hayah he'akov le-mishor* (Jaffa, 1912).
2. Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare* (Berkeley, Calif., 1968).
3. Yehudah Friedlander, "Al Ve-hayah he'akov le-mishor": *Masot 'al novela shel Shay Agnon* (Ramat Gan, 1993).
4. Yehoshua Radler-Feldman, *Mishpehot soferim: Partzufim* (Tel Aviv, 1961), 280.