

AGNON'S USE OF NARRATIVE-MOTIFS FROM *SEPER HASIDIM*

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IN MORE THAN ONE of his works, the twentieth-century Hebrew author, Shmuel Yosef Agnon, expressed a sense of kinship with *Hasidut Ashkenaz*, the pietist upsurge in the Rheinland during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries which produced, as the central work of its literary legacy, *Seper hasidim* ("The Book of the Pious"). In his work, "Hadam vəkisse," for example, the narrator, who can be closely identified with Agnon himself, states that his soul was attracted to the generation of the *hasidim* of Ashkenaz for their wholeness and righteousness and faith, even though it did not elect to descend to the world in their era "due to the distance in time from the generation of the Messiah." Though the narrator is saddened by not having chosen to be part of the generation of the pietists of Ashkenaz he adds:

In any event, I did not go out from there empty. And if the world should retreat in time and all the holy communities which have suffered martyrdom were to come to life, I would be able to walk among them as one of them . . . (Agnon, 1975, pp. 178-179)

In "Qorot batteynu," a story of the author's own family line, the name Shmuel, which occurs and recurs in the family genealogy, is traced to the father of Rabbi Yehuda Hasid, considered to be the author of *Seper hasidim* (Agnon, 1962, pp. 41-43). In the first chapter of "Qorot batteynu," it is pointed out that the patriarch of the family in the saga, Rav Shmuel, himself belongs to the family of Rabbi Yehuda Hasid (Agnon, 1962, pp. 26-27). The question of the author's first name is discussed also in "Hadam vəkisse," where we read:

I called myself Shmuel after [the biblical] Samuel of Ramah and father called me Shmuel after my forefather, Rabbi Shmuel [the Maharsha, Rabbi Samuel Eliezer ben Judah ha-Levi Edels, 1555-1631] who, in turn, was named after our forefather, Rabbi Shmuel, the father of Rabbi Yehuda Hasid, author of *Seper hasidim*. (Agnon, 1975, pp. 186–187)

Agnon's relationship to *Seper hasidim* (hereafter *S.H.*) involves also his use of narrative-motifs from that work in certain of his stories and novels. Some of these I will attempt to examine in this study. In the early decades of his writing, Agnon drew upon motifs from *S.H.* in two of his short stories, while in each case remolding the basic story-type in ways which merit attention and analysis.

One of the most well-known stories from *S.H.* that of the tender of cattle. It opens like this:

As the case of one man who was a tender of animals and did not know how to pray. Each day he would say, "Master of the World, it is revealed and known to You that if You had animals and were to give them to me to keep, though for all [others] I tend for wages, for You I would tend them without any wages because I love You." And he was a Jew.

Once a scholar was walking along and found the shepherd praying in this way. He said to him, "Fool, do not pray like this." The shepherd said to him, "How shall I pray?"

Immediately the scholar taught him the order of blessings and the reading of the *šema* and the *amida* on condition that he not say what he was accustomed to say. After the learned man left, he forgot all that the latter had taught him and he did not pray. And in addition, he was afraid to say that which he had been accustomed to say for the learned man had so prevented him. That night the scholar saw in a dream that he was told, "If you do not tell him that he should say what he has been accustomed to say before you came to him and if you do not go, know that evil will befall you, for you have robbed me of a soul for the World-to-Come." He immediately went and said to him, "How do you pray?" He told him, "I don't pray, for I forgot what you taught me and you commanded me not to say, "if he had animals, etc." The scholar said that "such and such came to me in a dream. Say what you are used to saying." (*S.H.*, Parma ed., #5–6)

The unit then goes on to quote the talmudic saying, *raḥamana libba ba'e* ("God desires the heart," b. *Sanhedrin* 106b).

This tale from *S.H.* falls in the category of the paradoxical story, emphasizing as it does the gulf between the way the world judges a person or a mode of conduct and a truer estimation as perceived in the eyes of God. The biblical story of the election of Saul contains a succinct definition of the perspective of the paradoxical story. "For man looks on the outward appearance while God looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16:7). In such stories it is often the simple,

unlearned Jew, lacking knowledge of the ways of worship accepted by official Jewish law and practice, who finds favor in God's eye. *Kavvana* (intent and concentration of mind and soul), which is often the supreme value in this type of story, is precious in God's eyes even when associated with ways of prayer which become the object of sharp criticism and even of ridicule by more learned Jews. The hero of this type of story is the *tam*, the person of simplicity and wholeness.¹

In 1923, Agnon published a short story, "Ma'aše 'ezriel moše šomer hassəparim" ("The tale of Ezriel Moshe, the keeper of books"), about a porter who did not know the meaning of the prayers he recited in the synagogue. So following the morning prayer in the house of study, he would say:

Master of the World, I do not understand what I have prayed, but it stands to reason that You, before whom all is revealed and known, know all that is written in the Siddur; may it be Your will that You will receive my prayer with mercy and with favor.

And then he would add these words which closely recall those of the tender of cattle in the story from *S.H.*, "But I swear by my beard, were the Holy One, blessed be He, to give me a burden to carry, I would carry it without requesting wages" (Agnon, 1953b, p. 389).

In addition to the similarity of the prayer and its pledge, a further connection with the story in *S.H.* is evident in that while the *tam* in the story is a porter by occupation, in the end (p. 394) he is made a *šomer səparim* (a keeper of books) in the martyrs' chamber in Paradise, and it is this role which is mentioned in the title of the story. The word *šomer* ("keeper") recalls the occupation of the shepherd in *S.H.* who offered to be a keeper (*šomer*) of God's cattle.

The reader notes an additional link with *S.H.* in Ezriel Moshe's beard. Repeated mention of his beard echoes in the latter part of the story when, during a pogrom, the sight of the hero's beard temporarily frightens off attackers from desecrating the holy books in the house of study; still later (p. 393), the attackers hang him by the beard. The beard also suggests an association, explicitly mentioned in the story (p. 389), with Rabbi Yaaqov bar Rav Yaqir who, with his beard, had swept the floor in front of the Holy Ark, just as Ezriel Moshe himself did. The source of this tradition concerning Rabbi Yaaqov bar Rav Yaqir is found in *S.H.* (Bologna ed., #128).

In introducing Ezriel Moshe, the story informs us (p. 388) that "he was a porter and he was from a family of porters and he was great in strength and in work (*vəhaya muṣṭlag bəkoah uḅa'əboda*) . . ." These words suggest a similar expression which occurs frequently in pietistic folk stories, *muṣṭlag bətora uḅa'əboda* ("great in the study of Torah and in worship"), and the overtones of

1. See Maharam Hagiz (1733, p. 219).

the latter expression, overheard in the former, very subtly convey that at the story's opening, Ezriel Moshe possessed neither learning nor the ways of worship; his talents were limited to physical strength alone.

In accord with the norms of the story-type extolling the simple, unlearned Jew, *kavvana* is a central value in the story. It is the intensity of the hero's *kavvana* which shaped the course of his life. Yet *kavvana* is only the beginning of the spiritual odyssey of Ezriel Moshe. *Kavvana*, in the context of this story, is not sufficient in itself but rather is the means and the key to attaining a goal beyond itself. In Agnon's story, unlike in the tale from *S.H.*, the offer made by the hero to God is actually fulfilled. First, *Ezriel Moshe* finds an opportunity to carry the books of a learned Jew to the latter's new home. Moving a library of sacred books is, in a sense, a way of carrying a burden which belongs to God and thus he fulfills the pledge. Later, when during a pogrom he runs to the academy to place its books in sacks and hide them from the hands of the attackers, he again fulfills his pledge to carry, without wages, a burden given by God.

The story in *S.H.* includes a conflict in values between the way of prayer of the shepherd and the knowledge of the learned Jew who attempts to teach the shepherd the correct way of prayer. Such conflict is not present in the story by Agnon in which the pattern of the paradoxical story merges with another pattern defined in a quotation brought from *Šəney luhot habbərīt* of Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz:

. . . one who is completely ignorant, etc., and he recites these names [i.e., names of sages and names of their books] and his soul desires them and he cries that he doesn't understand them then finds favor with God, may He be blessed, and it [knowledge] will be granted to him in the future. (Agnon, 1953b, p. 392)

Ezriel Moshe undergoes a definite metamorphosis. At the beginning we perceive him as a simple, unlearned Jew, and indeed he likens himself to a horse and to a donkey bearing burdens (p. 389). But through his intense longing for learning and his love of books, he becomes (p. 392) a *ba'al cura* (a person of dignity, one whose learning and spiritual qualities have prevailed over his animal nature). He becomes a local authority on all practical matters relating to the Hebrew calendar and he acquires the ways of scholars. Earlier, "When they mentioned the name of a book, he would repeat the name of the book like a baby who hears the rabbi pronounce a blessing and repeats it after him" (p. 391). The simile of the baby suggests that the hero whom we meet at the beginning, a person of coarse manners who rushes to the inn to drink wine following the morning prayer, is reborn, as it were, with a new character. Through the impact of his thoughts, he becomes "another man" (p. 392).

When the enemy reaches the house of study but is frightened at the sight of

Ezriel Moshe and of his beard, we read (p. 396), “As it is said, ‘And all the peoples of the land will see . . . and they will be afraid of you’” (Deut 28:10). The expression, ‘*ammey ha’arec*’ in its context in the biblical verse means simply the peoples or inhabitants of the land, but this same term later came to signify the unlearned. The use of this verse in the context of the story might subtly suggest that Ezriel Moshe is no longer numbered among the unlearned. His metamorphosis is a fact.

While building upon the pattern of the paradoxical story which praises the *kavvana* of the simple, unlearned Jew, the tale of Ezriel Moshe, at the same time, extols intellectual qualities as all the hero’s love is directed toward the world of learning. Agnon’s achievement in this tale was to transform the pattern of the paradoxical story into a story which emphasizes, in the same work, two seemingly contradictory values.

Let us turn to another type of story in *S.H.* In both printed editions we find the following:

There was one who fell asleep at night in the synagogue and the sexton locked him in; at midnight, he awoke and he saw souls wrapped in prayer-shawls, and two people who were still alive were among them; those two lived afterward for only a few days and died. (*S.H.*, Bologna ed., #711; Parma ed., #271)

Y. Levinsky (1973, p. 152), who traced the motif of the prayer of the dead at night in Jewish folklore, mentions that this story from *S.H.* marks the first explicit appearance of the motif in Jewish literature. Agnon’s short story, “*Yatom və’almana*” (“Orphan and widow”), closely reflects the complex of elements found in this little story. In “*Yatom və’almana*” we read of a sickly boy who went to the synagogue to recite the *qaddiṣ* on the anniversary of his father’s death. When he returned to the synagogue the following evening to hear a cantor and choir on the evening of the Sabbath, the orphan remained in the synagogue after the sexton had locked the door and the boy’s father, who was among the dead who gathered there to pray, gave him a *tallit* (prayer shawl). When the mother, in searching for her son who had not returned home following the service, looked through the keyhole in the door and saw her son among the dead, she understood that he was being taken from among the living. The macabre and the supernatural break in at the end upon what is, until that point, a realistic story.

If Agnon constructed “*Yatom və’almana*” upon this narrative-motif from *S.H.*, he added nuances not found at all in the source, e.g. the call of death serves as a comment upon life. The story includes questions such as, “Why does [the dead father] not recommend good for them [the boy and his widowed mother]? Can it be that he doesn’t see how she struggles together with his orphan-son?” (Agnon, 1953d, p. 166). And further on, the mother says, “. . .

let him go to the synagogue and say *qaddiṣ*, perhaps his father will see and he will awaken mercy for him” (p. 169). Irony marks the story in that while the dead father sees the distress of his family and their difficulties in holding body and soul together, his concern for his son, it turns out, is expressed in the unexpected act of drawing him into the world of the dead.

The conclusion of “*Yatom və'almana*” is a crescendo of the mother’s feelings about death undergoing a sudden change. When the mother first sees her son praying together with the dead in the locked synagogue, she intuitively regards death as a thing of dread and is severely agitated. A turning point then occurs with her realization that death can be positive in character and so “the heart of that woman became filled with joy” (p. 169), and then the story goes still further to identify death with redemption. The last words in the story are taken from the synagogal chant “*Ləḳa dodī*”: *qarəḅa 'el napši gə'alāh* (“draw near to my soul, redeem it”). Paradoxically, in the story, it is death which redeems man from his intolerable lot in life.

In the synagogue service, *Ləḳa dodī* marks the welcoming of the Sabbath and its verses speak of a time of awakening and redemption. Many of the verses of this chant are included in the story as both the cantor and the choir and, later, also the dead together with the boy himself sing its words. The story, however, bestows a macabre meaning upon the chant as its expressions of awakening and redemption are made to refer neither to the Sabbath day nor to the Sabbath of history but to death.

One hears also echoes of the Song of Songs within the story. The words (on p. 169), *‘əḅərə bəḳol harəḥobot vəlo məca'athu* (“She passed along all the streets but did not find him”) echo Cant 3:2, “I will rise now, and go about the city, in the streets and in the broad places, I will seek him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but I did not find him.” Then, the mother, calling to the boy at the end, says (p. 169), *hašmi'eni 'et qoləḳa* (“cause me to hear your voice”), words which suggest another verse from Song of Songs, “You who dwell in the gardens, companions listen for your voice, cause me to hear it” (8:13). The story opens in a season of cold and rain, a season of illness for little Yaaqov during which he is not able to leave the confines of his house. With spring, he shows signs of recovery and is then able to go outdoors. The words (on p. 166), *haqqor ḥalap ḥalaḳ lo* (“the cold weather has passed and departed”) echo the words from Cant 2:11, *haggešem ḥalap ḥalaḳ lo* (“the rains have passed and departed”) which have, in turn, been interpreted in *Šir hašširim rabba* as alluding to the events of redemption following the storms and Exiles of history. These associations elicit expectations of redemption for the widow and her orphan-son in the form of an improvement in their lot in life. At the conclusion, however, we note that the true liberation which parallels the spring of the year is really death. Again, the story interprets a liturgical source associated with the

Sabbath in a way which identifies death as the height of redemption and awakening.² The author has colored the macabre story-type so that it mirrors something of a naturalistic temper: life is so cruel that only death can liberate man from it.

Agnon's attraction to macabre elements from *S.H.* can be seen in the light of a much broader tendency within romantic and neoromantic European literature to look to medieval writings, folktales and ballads for elements of the supernatural and the macabre. Mario Praz (1933, pp. 40–77) has discussed the special interest which romantic and neo-Gothic literature found in the theme of death and in the kind of macabre reality present in folktales of all European peoples. Agnon felt an attraction to these same qualities, and macabre elements abound in many of his earlier tales. He looked for such qualities in Jewish lore, something which helps to explain the author's attraction to *S.H.*, a medieval work which includes many such macabre elements.

The same motif of the dead who come to pray in the synagogue is present also in considerably later works of Agnon including the novel, *'Oreah nata latun (A Wayfarer for the Night)* which first appeared in 1938–39. In this work, the narrator, a Jew from Eretz-Yisrael, describes his prolonged visit in the Galician town of his birth, where he experiences a profound deterioration in the life of the local Jewish community. It is in this connection that we read the following in a description of the old House of Study in Shbush:

The reading-desk stood still along with the lectern placed upon it. Opposite them stood the ark and on it a prayerbook. For several months now the prayerbook has not been opened and prayer has not risen from it, neither were the doors of the building opened — nor was a Torah-scroll taken out to read, except for the dead who came to the House of Study at night. (Agnon, 1953c, p. 411)

Another macabre motif from *S.H.* also appears in the same novel (p. 27): “It is mentioned in *Seper ḥasidim*, souls have books and just as they studied during their lives, so they study after their deaths.” This statement in the novel refers to the following short narrative-unit from *S.H.*:

Souls have books set on a table; just as they were accustomed to study in life so they study in death. It happened that Gentiles passed by the cemetery on the evening of the Sabbath and they saw a Jew with his book on his table and he was reading it. (Parma ed., #1546)

The immediate context of this motif in the novel is the disappearance of books from the old academy in the town (p. 14): “Bookcases that had been filled with books disappeared with only six or seven pages remaining in them.” Afterward, an old man leads the narrator to a place where one can obtain books. As

2. See also “Hanniddah” (Agnon, 1953a) and “Hahuppa haššəhora” (Agnon, 1913).

they enter the world of the dead, the old man gives him one of the books which disappeared from the old House of Study. Then, when the narrator presses the old man for an explanation, the latter explains (p. 93): "It is not I who brought it out; it rolled of itself and came to me. When study ceases from the academy, its books roll and come to us."

While drawing upon folk-traditions which set forth the striking similarity between the world of the living and that of the dead, part of the world-view reflected in *S.H.*, the effect of the use of these motifs in the narrative context of the novel is quite different from the spirit of the sources. In *'Oreah nata lalun*, there is no similarity between the living and the dead. In *Shbush*, the dead, and only the dead, come to the academy to pray. Similarly, it is only the dead who study there as the old House of Study occupies no place in the world of the living. The author removed the macabre sting from these motifs and turned them instead into means of intensifying the sense of a dying community and of the disintegration of traditional values. But the overtones of the macabre motifs from *Seper hasidim*, even in such a deflated state, continue to lend a distinct sense of dread to the decline of the world described in the novel.

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