

AGNON'S FOREST: THE CASE OF 'ÔRĒ'AH NĀṬĀ LĀLŪN

By

ARYEH WINEMAN

Derby, Connecticut

Critics have discussed extensively many of the motifs of Agnon's novel, *'Ôrĕ'ah nāṭā lālūn, A Guest Tarrying for the Night*, (Vol. 4), such as the Old House of Study, its key, and the town, Shibush, and have clarified the significance of those motifs in the novel.¹ Considerably less attention has been given to the forest-motif in that same novel.

The forest-motif is, of course, not unique to this novel among Agnon's writings. A thematic polarity between the town, seat of human society and culture, and the world of nature is stated in the very title of Agnon's short story, *Bayya'ar ūḥa'ir* (II, pp. 267-278)², which appeared during the same period as *'Ôrĕ'ah nāṭā lālūn*. The reader can discover signs of the same thematic polarity in somewhat earlier stories such as *'Al 'eḥen 'ahat, Upon One Rock* (II, pp. 302-304)³ and *Sippūr pāšūt, A Simple Story* (III, pp. 55-272)⁴, as well as in another story which appeared almost at the same time as *'Ôrĕ'ah nāṭā lālūn, Middirā ledirā, From Apartment to Apartment* (VI, pp. 170-181)⁵. While the meanings of the town-forest comparison in those stories overlap somewhat, they also differ from one work to another. In *'Ôrĕ'ah nāṭā lālūn*, the forest-motif can best be observed in terms both of its contrast with the town as such and, more specially, of its contrast with the Old House of Study as each of those polarities focuses upon the forest in its own way.

On perhaps the most obvious level, the forest, scene of the narrator's frequent strolls at certain times during the course of his prolonged sojourn

1. See Band (1968, pp. 314-321) and Kurzweil (1963, pp. 50-68).

2. See Band (1968, pp. 234-237) and Strauss (1961, pp. 148-153)

3. See Wineman (1982, pp. 31-34).

4. Agnon (1962, volume 5, chapter 26).

5. See Barzel (1972, pp. 166-168) and Wineman (1982, pp. 25-30).

in his Galician birthplace, Shibush, serves as an antithesis to the Old House of Study and to the Torah-culture which it embodies. The narrator begins his walks through the woodland in and around Shibush fairly early in the novel (p. 28),⁶ shortly after he is given the key to the Old House of Study and determines to reopen the academy and make it, once again, a vibrant institution. Even in the initial stages of his involvement with the academy, the Old House of Study competes with the forest for the narrator's time. During parts of the time-span spent in Shibush, he would divide his day between the two, often very unevenly. We hear, for example, at one point, that he has come to devote little time to studying in the academy and spends considerably more time walking in the fields and in the woods (p. 325). "Sometimes I enter the academy, and I don't spend time there but simply unlock and lock the door so that the key would not rust. And again I walk, as is my custom, in the field and in the forest" (p. 334). Later, approaching the end of the novel, the narrator completely abandons his practice of walking in the out-of-doors and devotes his entire time to studying Torah in the academy (p. 414).

Soon upon his returning to Shibush, the narrator establishes his daily routine dividing his day between the morning hours given to study in the academy and his afternoon hours when he would walk through the town's forests. It was the season when autumn colors reigned in the woodland, and he exclaimed, "I stand among the trees and let my eyes rejoice and say, *nā'ē, nā'ē* ('lovely, lovely'), and the skies smile at me, and it seems that they say, this man knows what is lovely (*nā'ē*), and so it is worth showing him more . . ." (p. 28). On the surface the two endeavors are integrated compatibly in his daily schedule, yet a degree of irony is overheard in the word *nā'ē* which recalls the use of that word in Mishna 'Abot 3:9, "Rabbi Jacob says, one who walks along the way and rehearses what he has learned and then interrupts his study saying, how lovely (*nā'ē*) is this field, Scripture regards him as though he is mortally guilty." Unlike many of the allusions to traditional Jewish sources which abound in Agnon's writings, the source echoed in this allusion is both a basic and a familiar source, one which is evoked by the repeated recurrence of the word *nā'ē*. The ironic overtone in the allusion to the rabbinic source shatters the sense of compatibility between the narrator's concern with the academy and his attraction to the world of nature; they appear, instead, as clearly contradictory values.

As though to give added force to the allusion, the word *nā'ē*, echoes much further into the novel. "The day was lovely (*nā'ē*) and signs of spring

6. Page references in this article refer to Agnon (1962, volume 4).

were seen (nir'e'û an alliterative echo of nã'e) in the land" (p. 237). Shortly afterward, the narrator praises God for granting him the wisdom not to be detained in the town but rather to go to the woods "where the day is especially lovely (nã'e) and the air is especially lovely (nã'e)."

The narrator's attitudes and behavior-pattern fluctuate during the course of the novel and while, at times throughout the year, he was drawn to the woodland, at other times he turned his back on the woods completely. Following the Passover festival, Shibush and its environs displayed all the signs of the coming of spring. But precisely during that time of year when the mountain just across from the academy was covered with grass bearing the season's fragrance, the narrator ignored the call of spring and he sat alone in the House of Study. Those who had frequented the academy during the chilly winter months to benefit from the heat of its stove no longer came. The narrator in the novel, at this point, intentionally refuses to be enticed to turn to the forest and to the loveliness and magic of spring as he appears, instead, to reenact the role of the Talmud-student in Bialik's *Hammatmid* who faithfully mans his post totally oblivious to the seasons of the year.

Placed against that antithesis of academy and nature are those passages, situated at various points during the course of the novel, which describe the forest as a scene of religious experience. The woodland is depicted in the language of prayer and is described in the style and stamp of rabbinic aggadah with allusions to Jewish mystic literature. The forest and field become a kind of academy in which the Creator, Himself, reveals His wonders.

In particular in connection with his Shavuoth visit with a group of young Jews working in the countryside in preparation for agricultural work in the land of Israel, the narrator perceives the world of nature through the lens of the world of rabbinic lore. He has ceased to ignore nature's beauty and is once again in touch with nature which now speaks the idiom of aggadah.

The heavens bring down dew and the ground brings forth grass, and the grass gives off fragrance. And between heaven and earth the voice of the bird of night is heard, as it says things which not every ear can hear. But the Ear above hears and responds from the heavens. (p. 322)

And the morning star, "the hind of dawn," shines as though through pure mist. Words of the morning liturgy are interwoven in the narrator's ensuing description of the dawn as the birds' singing informs him that

He, who in His goodness, renews continually each day the work of Creation has, this day, too, renewed His world. Immediately a new light shines.' And also the forest which had been concealed in darkness looked upward and revealed its trees. And every tree and every branch was glistening from the night dews. (p. 263)

In mention of the morning star or the hind of the dawn and of the bird which calls at the midnight hour, one overhears distant echoes of motifs found in the Zohar.⁸ But perhaps the most striking expression of the sense of the sublime as associated with nature in *'Örë'ah nāšā lālūn* is the following brief passage which echoes both the style and text of rabbinic aggadah:

A person's eyeballs are small and the whole world cannot satisfy them, but there are times when a person's eye finds rest and satiety in a leaf of a tree, in a mere blade of grass in the field, in a small bird in the air, in a little insect, and the Holy One, blessed be He, reveals to him His mysteries.* (p. 277)

The Old House of Study beckons, but the world of nature is itself a house of prayer. "If it were not for the Old House of Study, I would remain standing in the forest and add praise and thanksgiving to Him whose world is like this." (p. 278).

In the town near the farms where the future pioneers are working, the green decorating the synagogue mirrors the woodland (p. 263), just as the forest and field and the night and the dawn at that point in the novel are grasped in terms drawn from the prayers and the texts of Jewish tradition. This sense of harmony between the academy and the forest mirrors the legend, quoted in the novel, that upon first coming to Poland the Jews found there a forest in which a tractate of the Talmud was inscribed upon

7. Both expressions are drawn from the first of the two blessings preceding the *šema* in the morning liturgy.

8. The morning star or the Hind of the Dawn represents the Shekhinah who, at the moment of its appearance, begins the ascent to the palaces of the King accompanied by those who study Torah in the solitude of midnight. At the break of dawn, such a person is shrouded with the light of holy knowledge (Zohar II, 56b-57a). The cock crows precisely at midnight and the Holy One, blessed be He, is joined by the righteous and saintly in the Garden of Eden marking the proper time to study Torah (Zohar I, 10b). At midnight, the cock, struck by the awakening winds, calls to the sons of men to rise and occupy themselves with the chanting of the Torah (Zohar III, 23a-23b).

9. The passage echoes Ecc 1:8 and Prov 27:20 and also the legend found in B. Tamid 32b in which Alexander the Great learns that the desire of the human eye outweighs all his gold and silver while a little dust of the earth is sufficient to outweigh the eye. Unlike the pessimistic tone of the sources, Agnon's statement is thoroughly affirmative in ambience, giving pronounced voice to the wonder and marvel of nature.

each tree (p. 215).¹⁰ While the sharp antithesis between Torah and nature is mitigated, it is, nevertheless, still present. As a natural house of prayer and a scene of fresh religious experience, the woodland is the scene, also, of God's revelation of the marvels of His world, a revelation which bypasses the academy where revealed texts are studied. Hence, this sublime dimension of the forest in the novel emphasizes, in its own way, the narrator's distance from the spiritual world of the Old House of Study which he sought to resurrect.

But if the woodland represents the antithesis of the academy, on another level, the two parallel one another. In both the Old House of Study and the woods, the narrator is basically alone (pp. 27, 28). Furthermore, the narrator's interest in the academy stems from the role which that institution played in his childhood and youth (p. 21). In seeking to revitalize the Old House of Study he sought not only to restore Shibush to its era of greater glory as a thriving community rooted in traditional Jewish life and study, but he was seeking to return to the world he had known in his childhood. Similarly, the forests of the town were important to him for the very same reason that he knew them from his childhood years. Like his task in restoring the academy, also his strolls within the woods represent an attempt to flee the present into the lost or imagined world of his childhood. In asking what were his thoughts while walking in the woods, he could suggest only the possibility that he recalled the days of his youth when he spent time there alone (p. 237).

The forest served as an escape, also, from confronting some grim realities of human suffering resulting largely from World War I. Early in the novel, immediately following a stroll through the town's woods, the narrator sees a living picture of sorrow in Ignatz, the beggar who had lost his nose in the war. What emerges is that juxtaposition of suffering and nature's beauty which tends to interpret the latter as such an escape from confronting the former. Part of the irony suggested in the use of the word, *nā'e*, on the previous page of the novel might refer to this very disparity between natural beauty and human suffering. Whereas in the woods, God reveals to the narrator the marvels of His Creation (pl. 28), concerning Ignatz we read the narrator's words, "The Holy One, blessed be He, places an apron over my eyes" (p. 29) in order that he might avoid perceiving the human misery and ugliness around him.

In addition, various suggestions in the narrative constitute a context in which those strolls in the woods exemplify the lack of any goal-oriented

10. The legend is mentioned also in Agnon (1962, volume 2, p. 353).

and purposeful activity (*taklit*), an escape from responsibility and from a responsible attitude in life (p. 276). The forest signifies a realm which recognizes no such demands upon man who, then, feels himself, like his environment, to exist freely and naturally without the need to strive consciously for any aim or purpose.

But the real significance of the narrator's attempt to escape in the forest lies in his inability to do so. For even in the midst of nature, he is unable to flee from himself, from his condition and concerns. He finds himself alone and isolated in the forest just as he is outside of the forest "for he still had not attached himself to the world and the world has not joined him to it" (p. 277). And since the woods do not allow him to escape and there, too, he must confront himself, he returns to the academy.

If the woods appear in the novel both as antithesis of the Old House of Study and as a parallel to it, the contrast between town and forest is simpler and relates more directly to the novel's essential underlying thematics. The narrator, returning to his birthplace for an extended visit, finds Shibush the scene of rapid and disappointing decline. Time and the sufferings occurring within time, such as pogroms and war, along with social changes altering the character of life and society, have all taken their effect. As a result, a Jewish community with a glorious past exists now in an advanced state of deterioration.

The clear and persistent tone of the novel is one of decay and decline. The king's well which lies in a ruinous state of disrepair (p. 8) suggests the condition of the town as a whole. The deterioration of Shibush and of its Jewish community is depicted and suggested in various ways, direct and oblique. These include, among others, echoes of the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem in the account of happenings in the town and of its Jewish community. They include, in addition, the thumbnail history of the hasidic sect in Shibush and of its opponents. Here, too, the past is marked by glory, dignity and excellence as the Tsurtekov rabbi, a descendent of King David and one who, were the generation worthy, would be king of all Israel, held court in the town (p. 184), while a pale spiritual poverty characterizes the present. They include, also, the subtle use of basic terms from the vocabulary of Lurianic Cabbalah in passages which portray the *sehira* 'breaking' or 'disrepair' of the city (p. 320), while ruling out the very possibility of *tiqqun* 'repair' (pp. 302, 345). The town is constantly growing older; it has a history, but no present to speak of and no basis for a future.

What the narrator encounters in his native-town "testifies," according to Kurzweil (1963, p. 50), "to the ruinous effects of time" which changes

all of life, the constant flux of time "in the midst of which we are placed and which bears us, our small happiness and our unlimited suffering." Just like the ever-moving waters of the river, Streifa, which flows through Shibush, so time and the catastrophes within time continually flow, disintegrating and destroying the shapes of life and making it impossible to return to the world of yesterday.

As Band (1968, p. 290) has observed, "Apparently, the only aspect of Shibush which can live up to the aura generated by childhood memories is the natural setting of the city, the forests, the mountains and the river." When placed in contrast with the town as a scene of decline in time, the forest acquires archetypal overtones suggesting some of the qualities of paradise. In contrast to a world subject to the reality of time, the forest represents a different kind of reality, a realm of perpetual newness. Always self-renewing, it knows no decline. The woods, and not the town, exemplify God's act of constantly renewing His world. In the woods, the narrator always discovers that which is new (p. 277). The forest is free from the burden of time, and it is this above all else which explains the narrator's attraction to it.

But while the narrator is attracted to the woods, they fail to provide for him a haven from the basic existential concerns from which he, at times, seeks to flee to the timeless forest. Even in the woods, he is aware of the problems of man living in a world subject to time.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agnon, S. Y. 1962. *Kol sippûrâw šel Šemû'el Yôšep 'Agnôn*. (8 Volumes). Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv.
- Band, A. J. 1968. *Nostalgia and Nightmare, A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon*. Berkeley and Los Angeles.
- Barzel, H. 1972. *Bên 'Agnôn leqapqa*. Ramat Gan.
- Bialik, H. N. 1966. Hammatmid. *Kol šire Ḥayyim Nahmân Bialîq*, pp. 313-333. Tel-Aviv.
- Kurzweil, B. 1963. *Massôt 'al sippûrê šay 'Agnôn*. Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv.
- Simon, M. and Sperling, H. (translators). 1949. *The Zohar* (5 Volumes). London and Bournemouth.
- Strauss, A. L. 1961. *Bedarkê hassîprût*. Jerusalem.
- Wineman, A. 1982. *'Ağgâdâ ve'ommanût: 'iyyûnim biširat 'Agnôn*. Jerusalem.