Agnon’s Nobel Speech in Light of Psalm 137

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In 1966, the Nobel Prize for literature was awarded to S. Y. Agnon. This was a major event for the Jewish world at large and for Israel in particular. Agnon was the first Israeli to win a Nobel in any field, and he remains the only Hebrew-language author ever to have received the Nobel Prize in literature. In Israel, Agnon’s award was viewed as a major diplomatic coup, and a ripe opportunity for the young state to gain attention as a cultural force on the world stage. Let us recall that the year 1966 is but a moment in historical memory from the Holocaust. As such, the prize was perceived as recognition not only of the Jewish people’s physical survival of the smokestacks of Auschwitz, but of its self-reconstitution as a sovereign nation—such an entity bests its enemies but no less develops a meaningful culture.

For Agnon, too, the Nobel Prize was an affirmation—of what Hebrew as a language of Jewish life, learning, and literature had reached. Agnon had been a young “combatant” in the great Hebrew wars, joining the likes of Bialik and others, often against Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. The battle concerned the existential state of the Hebrew language: Was it to be revived, as the latter firmly held, or only reconstituted, as Agnon believed? In Agnon’s view, Hebrew could not have been revived, because in order for something to be revived it first had to be dead, which as a language of prayer and scholarship it never was. It was precisely those sources of learning, and especially rabbinic Hebrew, that Agnon sought to distill and recast as modern literature.

Agnon’s sense of self-worth has been well documented, as has his biting mock modesty. Upon notification of his award he declared, “To be able to write a single sentence properly in Hebrew is worth all the prizes in the world.” It may be safely said that he was happy to receive the Nobel Prize, an award that he had sought for decades. Significantly, at nearly 80, Agnon was much older than the typical Nobel laureate in literature. The world generally expects at least one final piece of work from

the recipient of a Nobel. Not so in Agnon's case. Although he was toying with *Shira* and with the stories that would become *A City in Its Fullness* and a few other unfinished pieces of business, his career was essentially over. And here he was in 1966, in his white tie and tails, Agnon and his wife and the king of Sweden.

It might be said with some certainty that the Swedish Academy had never met a laureate quite like Agnon. Upon hearing his or her name announced, the Nobel laureate is expected to walk to the podium, accept the prize, and shake hands with the king. That is the extent of the expected interaction; the recipient is then meant to return to his or her seat. Agnon, however, took the opportunity to engage in an extended discussion with King Gustav.[1] The king was a tall, lean man and Agnon rather short and stout; the king, being hard of hearing, leaned over to listen as Agnon chattered on and on. Later, during his speech, Agnon famously recited the blessing one recites upon seeing a king. The significance and theatrics of the occasion were not lost on the Hebrew author.

Agnon shared the Nobel Prize with Nelly Sachs, a German Jewish poet who wrote lyrical poems about the Holocaust. The highly acclaimed author was not happy about the idea of sharing the prize with Sachs, whose work has not received a great deal of diffusion and who, until today, remains relatively unknown (the force of her verse not being well conveyed in translation). Although there is precedent for the literature prize being divided, it is not common to do so, and to date, this was the last time it was done. The constitution of the Nobel Committee makes it clear that a shared prize does not indicate that the recipients are somehow "half worthy." Each recipient of a shared Nobel Prize must be worthy of having received it on his or her own. Not infrequently, scientific research is conducted in collaboration with others, in which case a shared prize is well understood. In the field of literature, this sort of collaboration is markedly less frequent.

Unusual as it was on the Stockholm stage, Ingvar Andersson of the Swedish Academy faced the two authors, Agnon and Sachs, and informed them, "This year's literary Prize goes to you both with equal honor for a literary production which records Israel's vicissitudes in our time and passes on its message to the peoples of the world." Turning to Agnon, he continued,

In your writing we meet once again the ancient unity between literature and science, as antiquity knew it. In one of your stories you say that some will no doubt read it as they read fairy tales, others will read it for edification.[2] Your great chronicle of the Jewish people's spirit and life has therefore a manifold message. For the historian it is a precious source, for the philosopher an inspiration, for those who cannot live without literature it is a mine of never-failing riches. We honor in you a combination of tradition and prophecy, of saga and wisdom.

And he went on to say,

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

Faulkner, the great author of the American South, created through words a wholly realized world, Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi. This literary world recalls a southern Buczacz. In Agnon we meet a young man from Buczacz who leaves his hometown, almost never to return. But our protagonist never really leaves Buczacz at all; when he dies, an old man, he is still there in Buczacz, it is part of

him. In like manner, Hannibal is part of Mark Twain, and Newark remains in Philip Roth. Faulkner uttered these lines when the dust was still settling on Auschwitz. He was conveying the power of literature as a vivifying force—somehow culture can be nearly destroyed, and yet in the spring the buds will again emerge. In Agnon's writing this was the message broadcast in the shadow of the Holocaust in nowhere less than in the State of Israel and in no delivery system less significant than the ancient Hebrew language, which was now returning.

At this point, we, too, return—to Agnon in the Stockholm limelight: We see him rise to deliver his speech—a speech that is written in Hebrew. Indeed, such a speech would have been unimaginable in any other tongue, and for two reasons. First, Hebrew, Yiddish, and German were the only languages Agnon could speak; second, it was inconceivable that the Israeli Hebrew laureate would deliver his thanks to the Swedish Academy in in anything other than the Holy Language in which he toiled. Abba Eban, then foreign minister of Israel, thought that he ought to have a hand in crafting Agnon's speech; after all, from a diplomatic standpoint, the Nobel Prize ceremony was an unprecedented opportunity to advance Israel's diplomatic goals. Agnon, however, took a different view of the matter. It is said that he retorted, "Tell Abba Eban that when he receives the Nobel Prize, he can write his own acceptance speech."

Thus, Agnon would write his own speech, and he would deliver it in Hebrew. A small glitch remained: Not a soul in the room save the laureate, his wife, and small handful of guests could understand the language. Agnon's solution was to deliver the opening section in Hebrew, after which the full text would be read on his behalf in English. As a piece of rhetoric, Agnon's text is decidedly bizarre. Of the slightly more than 2,000 English words in the speech, a solid half was biographical in nature.[3] By way of introduction, the prize-winning author told his audience the talmudic tale of men of distinction of Jerusalem, who would only dine with those they knew personally (*Sanhedrin* 23a). One can imagine that at this point, the king of Sweden might have glanced at the old Jewish author with the big black skullcap and mused: What is this rabbi yammering on about? Perhaps answering that unspoken question, at this moment Agnon tells the audience, "I must tell you something about myself, then." And so, Agnon does.

Significantly, Agnon's biography was amongst his greatest artistic creations. Everything about him, from his date of birth to the date of his *aliya* to his very name, was part of the myth, part of the fable the author had crafted about his own identity. It is a matter of historical record that he was born in the summer of 1887. Agnon claimed that he was born on Tisha B'Av 1888, which fell out on August 8 that year (the numerically lyrical 8th of the 8, '88). As it happens, Tisha B'Av did not fall out on August 8 that year, nor did Tisha B'Av fall out on Agnon's birthday the year before. Agnon was born around Tisha B'Av in 1887. This birth year obfuscation was likely related to draft-dodging efforts. Yet, we might suggest a further signification: For a writer possessed by the notion of the relationship of diaspora and redemption, the symbolism of being born on Tisha B'Av would have been of chief importance.
Indeed, Agnon anchors his name in such ideas, deriving his pseudonym from the Hebrew term *agunot*; not the *agunot* of estranged husband and wife, but the *igun* of the Jewish people being both chained to their Father in heaven and being distanced from Him. If one begins from the midrashic notion of God and the Jewish people in the bonds of matrimony, these marital partners are clearly in need of counseling. God has not divorced the Jews, but perhaps we might say that they are separated over these many years since their banishment from Jerusalem. The Jewish people itself is an *aguna*. God has abandoned them; they are akin to the proverbial abandoned wife; such themes echo time and again in the Agnon oeuvre. In Stockholm, Agnon's biography may well have struck the uninitiated as rather odd from a rhetorical point of view, especially compared to other Nobel laureate speeches. Yet, what Agnon offered was not biography *qua* biography; rather, it was biography *qua* midrash. In effect, what Agnon provided for the Swedish Academy and the world was a myth of himself that melds into the myth of the Jewish people.

At this point, we might note Agnon's rendering of the line that until recently emblazoned the 50-shekel bill in the State of Israel: "As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the Exile. But always I regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem." Agnon went on to say,

In a dream, in a vision of the night, I saw myself standing with my brother-Levites in the Holy Temple, [4] singing with them the songs of David, King of Israel, melodies such as no ear has heard since the day our city was destroyed and its people went into exile. I suspect that the angels in charge of the Shrine of Music, fearful lest I sing in wakefulness what I had sung in dream, made me forget by day what I had sung at night; for if my brethren, the sons of my people, were to hear, they would be unable to bear their grief over the happiness they have lost. To console me for having prevented me from singing with my mouth, they enable me to compose songs in writing.[5]

This particular autobiographical claim, like so many made by Agnon, is quite outlandish. Yet much can be gleaned from the story he chose to tell about how his work unfolded. By all rights, as Agnon tells the tale, he ought to have gotten up every day, gone to the Temple in Jerusalem, and there sang the psalms of King David, thus performing the job of a Levite. As that position has been closed on account of the destruction of and exile from Jerusalem, he instead wrote stories. Those 23 tomes of modern Hebrew literature are a compensation for such holy work having been denied him. Agnon, according to Agnon, was compensated to compose in prose what was formally sung in praise. Making a radical statement, the author likens his work to nothing less than Temple worship.

Setting aside for the moment the grandiloquence of Agnon's move, we might consider just how this work serves as a consolation for the trials and tribulations of Jewish history. Agnon alludes to this notion recurrently, both in his works of fiction as well as in occasional essays or talks.[6] These passages are beautiful portrayals of the purity of religious experience as it is depicted in the author's stories, through eyes of the child: the child in his grandfather's house, the child with the Bible or prayer book, the child receiving his first pair of *tefillin*, the young boy going off with his father and grandfather, his first memories of going to *shul* on Yom Kippur, the splendor of Yom Kippur. Such transmission does indeed communicate the mystery, the grandeur of the religious experience.

Here Agnon presents a major leitmotif of his production: "I was five years old when I wrote my first song. It was out of longing for my father that I wrote it. It happened that my father of blessed memory went away on business and I was overcome with longing for him and I made a song." Agnon, we recall, had learned in *heder* and had a very close relationship with his father, who was a Torah scholar, having penned a volume on Maimonides' monumental code of Jewish Law. In the Nobel speech as well as in a variety of other places in his writing—both in the guise of autobiography as well as outright fiction—Agnon recounted that his very first composition came to him almost prophetically as a statement of poetic longing and lamentation for his beloved father, traveling on business to the regional fair, absent from the happy home in Buczacz in which young Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes (Agnon's birth name) was raised. This motif, namely, writing, storytelling, and creativity itself as a balm for pain, runs like connective tissue through Agnon's work. One need not be adept at unpacking literary symbolism to suggest that a little boy's longing for his father might also be read on the national plane of Israel's pining for its Father in heaven. Such polytextured writing lies at the core of Agnon's genius, and accounts for why a writer who was apparently so steeped in the "old world" of eastern European Judaism was honored in Sweden as one of the greatest of modern authors.

Agnon, recognized early on as a prodigy, enjoyed a happy childhood with his parents and four younger siblings. His father worked in the fur trade and would leave several times a year to attend the regional fairs. The little boy, sick for the absence of his father, comes home and places his head on the "handles of the lock"—a powerful symbol of longing for a lost love and, allegorically, for the Divine (Song of

Songs 5:5). He knows that on the other side of the door his Abba won't be there. So what happens? A wail emerges from his heart and he cries out, "Where are you father, father? Where can you be found?" Right away another cry comes forth, "I love you with a love so profound" (the spontaneous cries of the boy come out as a rhymed Hebrew couplet). Agnon is not composing a poem; rather, these words are flowing from him. When we sing or pray we must generate the words; in prophecy, the words come to us from somewhere else.

Agnon is not claiming prophetic vision. Yet we have here a description of the artist as a young man, and the initiation of the artist to his craft, that of the art of writing. The art of composing is one that comes through some kind of nearly divine inspiration but is depicted as the immediate reaction to pain and loss. That, at least, is the art of writing for Agnon; a response to suffering, a response to longing. It is about standing with one's hand on the handle of the lock, fully present to the uncertainty of the fulfillment of your desires. Gershon Shaked observed that Agnon, like Kafka, portrays "the artist as a *poeta doloroso*, a poet whose torments become the source and substance of his work. But Agnon's most conscious poetic manifesto associates his creativity with a specifically nostalgic sorrow...a longing for the lost ancestral home as the wellspring of his work."[7]
Agnon's stories, particularly those of childhood—for example, "The Kerchief"— feature the element of the father going away to the fair and the mother waiting in anxious anticipation for his return. Intensely multivalent, these stories brilliantly succeed in conveying that one single thing means a multiplicity of things. In this light, we are ready to ask: When Agnon stood on the stage in Stockholm and announced, "As a result of the historic catastrophe that Jerusalem was taken and we were sent into exile and I always imagined myself as if I was Jerusalem born," what, precisely, does he wish his audience to understand?

Agnon is making a subtle move, an almost-intertextual one. In a kind of understated thematic intertextuality, I submit that he is drawing our attention to a different time that a Jew talked about singing a song, namely Psalm 137, "By the waters of Babylon." Ruth R. Wisse points out in her important book, *Jews and Power*, that the ambiguous relation between Judaism and power can be traced to this very Psalm, which conveys the predicament of the captives in Babylon following the sack of Jerusalem. The Babylonian captors taunt the Jews, ordering them to perform songs of Zion, "You Jews, you captive Jews with your harps. Give us a song, one of those old ditties you used to sing in that burnt Temple of yours." The Jews refused, uttering instead the pledge that would echo through the ages, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its cunning." The captive Jews sing about their longing for Jerusalem. When the Jews finally do sing out in that Psalm, the tune is far from the dirge that their captors demanded. "Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall how they cried, strip her, strip her to the very foundations. Fair Babylon, you predator, a blessing on him who repays you in kind what you inflicted on us." "You want a song?" we imagine them saying. "We'll sing you a song. We'll sing you a song about what happens to people who oppress the Jews."

Wisse elaborates,

"Edomites" are the generic enemies of Israel, Babylon the immediate aggressor. Rather than crushing the Jews' morale, the scorn of their captors has spiked Jewish anger and stiffened national resolve.... Yet for all its rhetorical severity, Psalm 137 does not exhort Jews to take up arms on their own behalf. Assuming full moral responsibility for the violence that war requires, it calls on the Lord to avenge the Jews' defeat and on other nations to repay Babylon "in kind." This reflects the historical record: It was the Persians, not the Jews who defeated the Babylonians, and King Cyrus who allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their Temple, thereby inspiring Isaiah's reference to him as "the Lord's anointed," the messenger of God's will, God's hand. God's hand, not the soldiering of Israel is credited with the Jews' political recovery.[8]

We conclude by returning to 1966, with Agnon receiving the Nobel Prize. The Swedish Academy has finally recognized the Jewish people, the Hebrew language, the nation, the State of Israel—and Agnon stands in Europe and is asked to give a song (or speech) of Zion. This request is far from the evil-minded one made by the bloodthirsty Babylonians; nonetheless, Agnon is indeed standing there in the shadow of the Holocaust. "You want me to sing a song?" Perhaps he thought. "I'll sing you a song. Let me tell you what we do in the face of suffering and exile: We do not respond, we do not wage war," and if we waged war in 1948, and six months after the Prize ceremony in 1967, it is only out of defensive necessity. Instead, what is the authentic Jewish response to suffering? Jews know what it means to live in exile. In her book, Wisse notes that the first Babylonian exile proved that the Jewish nation could survive outside the Land of Israel, leaving open the question of when and how they would regain it. At this point, Agnon might ask: Jews knew how to survive and now they've returned; do you know how Jews still survive? They survive in the text. But the texts become transformed in modernity through a renewed cultural production in our own language, in an authentic way, the kind of writing that Rav Kook, years earlier, had recognized that Agnon was writing.[9] Creativity is the authentic Jewish response to pain and catastrophe. From the catastrophe of history they will write modern literature; that was Agnon's message, delivered between the lines, standing there 50 years ago in Stockholm.

[1] Video footage at www.nobelprize.org.
[2] The story that could be read as fairy tale or for edification is "In the Heart of the Seas" in S. Y. Agnon, *Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town and Other* Novellas (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2014), see at 156.
[3] The speech in its English translation is available in *Forevermore & Other Stories* (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2016), 264–269.
[4] Agnon was, in fact, a Levite, descendent of the tribe of Temple choristers.
[5] Agnon uses the terms *shir* and *shirah* indiscriminately to mean both literal poetry as well as prose, or literature or art in general.
[6] See passages in autobiographical comments at prize speeches, e.g., in *MeAtzmi el Atzmi*, 26, 55–56; in works of fiction such as "The Sense of Smell" in *A Book That Was Lost* (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2008) 149–156.
[7] Gershon Shaked, "After the Fall: Nostalgia and the Treatment of Authority in the Works of Kafka and Agnon, Two Habsburgian Writers," *Partial Answers* 2:1 (January 2004), 88–89.
[8] Ruth R. Wisse, *Jews and Power* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 16–18.
[9] Jeffrey Saks, "A Portrait of Two Artists at the Crossroads: Between Rav Kook and S. Y. Agnon," *Tradition* 49:2 (Summer 2016), 32–52.