S. Y. Agnon: Thoughts on a Great Israeli Writer

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On December 10, 1966 Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the great Israeli Hebrew writer, delivered a speech at the Nobel banquet on the occasion of his having been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Quoting from the Bible, the Jewish Prayer book and rabbinic tradition, Agnon was as clear as possible that he was a Jew, a faithful Jew steeped in Judaism. He pointed out the dilemma of the Jewish People living centuries in Exile, and now struggling to find their way back to their ancient homeland in 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." As he concluded his remarks, he said: "If I am proud of anything, it is that I have been granted the privilege of living in the land which God promised our forefathers to give us."

Agnon (1887-1970) was born in Buczacz, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now Buchach, Ukraine. His original family name was Czaczkes. In 1908 he emigrated to Jaffa in the land of Israel. In 1913 he moved to Germany where he married Esther Marx; they had two children. The businessman and publisher, Salman Schocken, became Agnon's literary patron and freed him from financial worries. In 1924, a fire broke out in Agnon's home, destroying his manuscripts and library. Shortly thereafter he and his family moved to Jerusalem where he continued his career as a prolific Hebrew writer.

Agnon's work is laced with biblical and Talmudic passages. His stories and novels did not always have powerful or complicated plots; rather, it was his style of writing that engages the reader. He is calm, wise, gentle. He tells his stories as though he is talking to you in his living room over a cup of tea, without

pretensions or pomposity. The reader comes to see Agnon as an older, wiser friend…someone whose memories and thoughts have weight.

In his book, A City in its Fullness, he offers a nostalgic account of the town in which he was born and raised. His stories were about “former days, when the town stood in peace.” Agnon comments: “I was able to tell the things calmly and not in sorrow, and one would not have known from my voice what had happened to my town—that all the Jews in it had been killed. The Holy One, blessed be He, has been gracious to Israel: even when we remember the greatness and glory of bygone days, our soul does not leave us out of sorrow and longing. Thus a man like me can talk about the past, and his soul doesn’t pass out of him as he speaks” (p. 10).

There is irony in his words. He notes that all the Jews of the town were murdered, but then refers to the graciousness of the Holy One, blessed be He! How was the Almighty “gracious to Israel?” He lets them recount the past, including the tragedies, without dying of sorrow! Is Agnon speaking piously, in profound resignation to the will of God? Or is he mocking the notion of God’s being “gracious to Israel?” Agnon was indeed a religious man; but he was not at peace with God’s treatment of the Jews.

In spite of their sufferings in Buczacz, the Jews loved their birthplace. But after World War I, life became increasingly unbearable. Poverty was rampant. The government made constant decrees to the detriment of the Jews. “The old took comfort in the fact that they would soon die and not much longer have to endure their afflictions; they would be buried in the city where their ancestors were buried. The young looked toward the four corners of the earth for a place where they would be allowed to live. And the fewest of these few prepared to emigrate to the Land of Israel in order to work its land and to establish for themselves and their descendants a haven where they could be free of the yoke of Exile, which has been Israel’s burden since the day it left its land. Meanwhile, each saw himself living in the land of his birth as but a guest for the night” (pp. 560-61). This was the eternal Jewish dilemma—to be living in places of Exile for generations but always feeling as strangers. Agnon saw the return to the Jewish homeland in Israel as the key to Jews finally feeling really at home in the world.

In his book, A Guest for the Night, he describes having returned to his old town in Europe, that was now in terrible straits after the first World War. “I went to the Beit Midrash and stood before the locked door. Many thoughts passed through my mind in a short time, and this is one of them: the Beit Midrash still exists, but I am standing outside, because I have lost the key and cannot get in” (p. 83). He found

a locksmith to make a new key for the Beit Midrash. He hired someone to keep the fire burning in the fireplace so that the place was warm. Slowly, men began to gather again in the Beit Midrash, if only to stay warm on cold winter days. The Jews had been living in this town for generations; the Beit Midrash was coming back to life.

And yet, this was still the Exile. The authorities had the power to oppress the Jews, even to expel them. “I was born in this town and spent most of my youth here—but an official, who was not born here and has done nothing here but enjoy the best the town can give, may come along and tell me: Go, you belong to another country and you have no permission to stay with us. I thought of my forefathers, whose bones are interred in the town’s graveyard….I thought of my other relatives who had bestowed many benefits on the townsfolk—and now the authorities, who inherited all these benefits, could come and expel me from the town” (p. 110).

When he ultimately returned to the land of Israel, he had inadvertently also brought a key to the Beit Midrash with him. He put the key in a box and locked it; he made a necklace and wore it around his neck. He recalled the Midrash that in messianic days, the synagogues and study halls of the diaspora will be miraculously transported to the holy land of Israel. But when will the messiah bring this redemption? The key “is made of iron and brass, and it can wait, but I, who am flesh and blood, find it hard to endure” (pp. 508-9).

Agnon wonders about the sense of security felt by some Jews living outside the holy land. He tells the story of Mr. Lublin who lived in Leipzig and became a German citizen. Mr. Lublin wasn’t particularly observant religiously, and worked hard in his store to make a living and be a good citizen. Mr. Lublin believed that “Germany sees that all of us, all Germany’s Jewish citizens, sacrifice our children and our wealth for its war against the enemy, and is it possible that after all this they will still deprive us of our rights? Isn’t this so? Why are you looking at me like that?” (In Mr. Lublin’s Store, p.189). Why? Because the narrator (Agnon) thought Mr. Lublin was naïve to trust that the Germans would actually treat Jews fairly, as loyal citizens. No matter how many sacrifices Jews made on behalf of Germany, they were still always going to be victims, always strangers, always mistrusted. Exile was exile. Period.

Agnon has a particular nostalgia for authentic prayer. In his story “Hemdat the Cantor,” he describes how Hemdat ascended the prayer desk on the night of Yom Kippur. “And when he came to the pulpit he gripped it with his two hands, and cried out “’Oi!’ As if it were all-devouring fire. A sudden awe fell upon the entire

congregation and all rose and stood and trembled….Hemdat raised his head, his eyes closed and compressed, groping in the air, his eyeglasses swimming in tears….He covered his face with his tallit down to his heart, and he began to give voice, every time in a melody sweeter than the last. Then I understood what Father meant when he said, He who has heard the Kol Nidrei of Hemdat, knows what Kol Nidrei is" (p. 58). The people were uplifted by Hemdat's prayers. "For Hemdat prayed in awe and fear and feeling and with a broken heart, for Israel the holy nation, who sought to return to Him with a whole heart" (p. 59).

In reminiscing about his hometown of Buczacz, he tells of a man who recited the Musaf and gave him "a real taste of prayer." The prayer leader had a pleasant voice, but "it wasn't a voice we heard; it was prayer" (p. 100). The heartfelt longing and yearning of sincere prayer was what inspired Agnon. He was not impressed with external shows of praying, but with actual reaching out to God. In his book, To This Day, he quotes a woman: "'An intellectual'", she said, 'is someone who can recite Psalms without tears.' I couldn't have put it any better myself" (p. 53).

Agnon was prayerful, even as he realized that he was living in an unredeemed world, where God's mercy was not always evident. He named one of his books To This Day "in the language of thanksgiving for the past and of prayer for the future. As it says in the Sabbath morning service: To this day have Thy mercies availed us and Thy kindness not failed us, O Lord our God. And mayst Thou never abandon us ever" (p. 175).

Agnon's writings are sprinkled with wise insights that invite us to ponder his words. In describing a young man who rediscovered the Hebrew language and his connection with the land of Israel, Agnon writes: "he is meticulous with language and meticulous in all his actions. His hair is wild, but his thoughts are orderly. His clothes are in tatters, but his soul is intact" (Shira, p. 176). In his short story, "The Night," he notes: "But there are guests who come no matter how tightly one's door is shut, as they are the thoughts surrounding our actions." And in his story "Between Two Towns" he meditates: "The good Lord created a vast world, with many people in it whom He scattered wide, giving each place its singular quality and endowing every man with singular wisdom. You leave home and meet people from another place, and your mind is expanded by what you hear."

And poignantly, he writes of "two Austrians who meet outside of town and one says to the other, 'where are you going? And the other replies, 'I'm off to the forest to be alone.' 'Why, I also want to be alone,' exclaims the first. 'Let's go together'" ("In the Prime of Her Life"). This might serve as Agnon's invitation to

readers: I want to be alone, but I want you to come along with me so we can be alone together.