

Introduction

1. Emily Temple, *Norman Lock on his Favorite Short Story*, Flavorwire, May 17, '13

Agnon's "To Father's House" means something to me – something personal, in the way of a parable, admonishing me for what is everywhere evident in my *Love Among the Particles*: the bipolarity of a writer who wants to escape into his art – his words – and feels guilty for having betrayed the democratic principles and obligations taught him by his parents. In Agnon's tale, a man – a writer, perhaps – remembers with uneasiness that a long time has passed since he visited his father living in the distant town of his childhood. Painters have come on this, the night before Passover, to plaster and whitewash the man's workroom walls; and he frets that his work and his books will be ruined by their carelessness. A child appears, his young niece, as if from thin air; and he treats her with neither love nor charity. He finds himself, as though transported there, in the streets of his father's town; and invents reasons why he ought not to pay his respects at once to his father and allows trivial interruptions (by a second child, an innkeeper, an interpreter of obscure biblical texts) to keep him from performing his filial duty. Resisting sleep, to which, one senses, he long before this surrendered, the narrator (surely, he is a writer!) struggles to open his eyes. "Suddenly, I heard a noise like that of a sheet being torn. Actually, no sheet was being torn, but one small cloud high above was being torn, and once it was torn the moon came out, splitting the clouds, and a sweet light shone upon the house and upon Father." And having lost mine not so very long ago, I say to you that – for me, now – this is my favorite story.

2. Stephen Katz, *The Centrifugal Novel: S.Y. Agnon's Poetics of Composition*, pg. 89

The hero's recurring difficulty with opening his eyes while making his way back home is also unexplained in "To Father's House," further enhancing its dreamlike character and possibilities of meaning. As expected, the more explicit version of the manuscript provides a reason which is perhaps as mystifying as having no explanation at all... "because the gray sun burned my eyes (in truth the thing happened at night when the sun does not reign, but the deed occurred in a dream, and in a dream there is no difficulty for the sun to shine at night)" (ms-1:695).

3. Dr. Chaim Chamiel, **הספרות היפה בחינוך הנוער הדתי**

סיפור המעשה כמעט שאיננו בספר המעשים. לפנינו קטעי וידויים על שאיפות, געגועים, מאווים ותשוקות. רדיפה אחרי מטרה ואכזבות. ספר המעשים הוא ספר הוידויים והחלומות של אדם המעורה בחיים של תורה ויראה, אדם דתי אשר המציאות אורבת לנפשו לשסעה ולפלגה. דמיונותיו וחלומותיו של המספר הם: החגים, התפילה, בית המדרש ועולם המתים המופיעים לידו לרוב לעת משבר. המספר – המתוודה – מיטלטל בין תקווה ליאוש ובין כיסופים לאיבוד הרצון.

Anecdotes barely appear in the Book of Deeds. Before us are segments of confession for hopes, longings, ambitions and desires. Pursuit of a goal, and disappointments. The Book of Deeds is a book of confessions and dreams of a man who is immersed in a life of Torah and reverence, a religious man, for whose spirit reality lies in wait, to split and rend it. The speaker's illusions and dreams are of holidays, prayer, the study hall, and the world of the dead who appear at his side in great numbers in times of crisis. The speaker – the one who confesses – is buffeted between hope and despair, and between longing and loss of will.

Three Journeys

4. Peulat haTzaddik #501, explained in Chayyei Moharan http://www.hebrewbooks.org/pagefeed/hebrewbooks_org_44175_24.pdf וענין הנר שנפלו ניצוצות בתוך פיהם ונחזר הנר ונעשה נהר וכו' זה בחינת דיבורים חמים שממשיכים מלב העליון ע"י שנכמרו רחמי השי"ת עליו, ונפתח לב העליון ונשפע מלב העליון דיבורים, ועי"ז ממשיך ביאורי התורה ג"כ משם בבחינת "פתח צור ויזובו מים וכו'" וזה בחינת מה שנחזר הנר ונעשה נהר, כי הנר מרמז על הלב שהיא נר דלוק כידוע.

The lamp from which sparks fell into their mouths, and then the lamp became a river, etc., represents warm words emerging from the celestial heart, as Divine mercy is aroused for him, and the celestial heart opens, and from that celestial heart flow words, and through this the explanations of Torah flow, as in Tehillim 105:41, "The rock opened and water flowed." And this is the conversion of the lamp to a river, for the lamp represents the heart, which is known to be a burning lamp.

5. Dan Laor, *Did Agnon Write About the Holocaust?*

But from September 1939 onward Agnon knew full well that the German occupation of most of Polish territory, together with the Soviet occupation of east Galicia, the country of his birth, heralded the end of the Jewish community in Poland.

Furthermore, the story appeared in the June-July issue of *Gazit* magazine. This coincided with the invasion of the Soviet Union by a million-strong German army (June 21, 1941), and the German occupation of all of Polish territory, sealing the fate of Polish Jewry, including the Jews of Galicia. Thus, the journey described in "To Father's House" can easily be construed as Agnon's metaphorical attempt to return to the landscape of his childhood, even though he was well aware that the return was truly "belated," impossible in fact, owing to the new political situation that had emerged in Europe between September 1939 and June 1941.

6. Stephen Katz, *The Centrifugal Novel: S.Y. Agnon's Poetics of Composition*, pg. 91

Placed within the novel [*A Guest for the Night*]'s context, "To Father's House" is an expression of the hero's attempted escape from the reality he comes to know in Shibush, an escape motivated by his observation that all remnants of the world of the past – of the sanctity of the traditions to which he is drawn – have vanished... The hero's sole path in finding spiritual comfort remains a leap of the imagination to a Shibush of the past, a hindsight accompanied by an atavistic cry of the child within the man for his parent; thus, the frenzied search for comfort in father's house.

7. Dr. Mordechai Wurtzel, *Sefer haMaasim*

נטישה זו של האמונה עם תחושת הנתק מהשורשים, הקושי לחזור אליהם והפחד מנקמת הקל, הוא האב הגדול שבשמים, המתוארים בסיפור "לבית אבא", יכולים היו לתת את ההשראה לאותו עולם מוזר, בלתי יציב וכאוטי, שבסיפורי "ספר המעשים".

This rejection of faith, with the sense of separation from roots, and the difficulty of returning to them and the fear of revenge from Gd, the great Father in Heaven, as described in *To Father's House*, could inspire that strange world, unstable and chaotic, found in the stories of *The Book of Deeds*.

8. The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, *Satire*

The origins of modern Jewish satire may be traced to late eighteenth-century Germany. Its prominent and most militant creators included Yitsḥak Euchel (1756–1804), Sha'ul Levin-Berlin (1740–1794), and Aharon Halle-Wolfssohn (1754–1835). They aimed their venom at superficial intellectuals whose enlightenment was mere lip service on the one hand, and the hypocrisy of Orthodox religious fanatics on the other.

9. **הגוייה של תשעה באב**, trans. Stephen Katz, *The Centrifugal Novel: S.Y. Agnon's Poetics of Composition*, pg. 186

Rabbi Aharon Freeman, may his memory be blessed, telling from Rabbi Eliyahu Pflsner, may his memory be blessed, told me: Itzik Euchel and his friends found a Gentile woman who cooked for them on Tisha b'Av. They called her the Gentile Woman of Tisha b'Av. One Tisha b'Av eve, they came and told Itzik Euchel that the Gentile Woman of Tisha b'Av had died. He said to his friends: "Friends, let me tell you something. It is not possible that between today and tomorrow we can find another Gentile woman to cook for us for Tisha b'Av. Therefore, since the Gentile Woman of Tisha b'Av had died, let us fast together on this Tisha b'Av with all of Israel over the destruction of Jerusalem."

10. Yehoshua 24:16-17

וַיַּעַן הָעָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ הַלַּיְלָה לָנוּ מַעֲזֹב אֶת־ד' לַעֲבֹד אֱלֹהִים [חול] אַחֲרֵיהֶם: כִּי ד' אֱלֹהֵינוּ הוּא הַמַּעֲלָה אֶתְנוּ וְאֶת־אֲבוֹתֵינוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֶבְדִּים...

And the nation replied and said, "It would be a disgrace for us to leave Gd, to serve the gods of others. For HaShem our Gd is the One who brought us, and our ancestors, up from Egypt, the house of slaves..."

11. Hosheia 1:2

וַיֹּאמֶר ד' אֱלֹהֵי־הוֹשֵׁעַ לְךָ קַח־לְךָ אִשָּׁת זְנוּנִים וְיִלְדֵי זְנוּנִים כִּי־זָנָה תִּזְנֶה הָאָרֶץ מֵאַחֲרַי ד':

Go, take for yourself a woman of straying and children of straying, for the land strays from after Gd.

A Pesach Journey

12. Yehoshua 24:2-4

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶל־כָּל־הָעָם כֹּה־אָמַר ד' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵבֶר הַנָּהָר וְאוֹלֵף אוֹתוֹ בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וְאַרְבֶּה אֶת־יָרְעוּ וְאֶתְמוּלוּ אֶת־יִצְחָק: וְאַתֶּן לְיִצְחָק אֶת־יַעֲקֹב וְאֶת־עֵשָׂו וְאַתֶּן אֶת־הַר שְׁעִיר לְרִשְׁתָּהּ אוֹתוֹ וַיַּעֲקֹב וּבְנָיו יָרְדוּ מִצְרַיִם:

And Yehoshua said to the entire nation: So declares HaShem, Gd of Israel! By the river your ancestors dwelled forever, Terach, father of Avraham and father of Nachor, and they served the gods of others...