# The Orange Peel and Other Satires

*Including all the stories from*
The Book of State

S.Y. AGNON

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW

WITH ANNOTATIONS AND A FOREWORD BY
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*The* Toby Press

*Foreword*

# The Metaphysics of Agnon's Political Satire

A comic mode is present throughout S.Y. Agnon's wide repertoire of writings. Known as a master ironist, comedic irony was a tool always at the ready, alongside other humorous tones that he could strike at will. However, when looking at his entire canon, we must recognize that, unlike his Yiddish counterpart, Sholem Aleichem, comedy was not his specialty, no matter how entertaining we find much of his writing. When examining the ethical or moral problems facing the Jewish world he wrote in the tragic genre. This is not to say that even his darkest works are without humor, and indeed, he knew well how to marshal comic relief to diffuse tension even in his most bleak depictions of Jewish history.

The stories in this collection, while not components of the backbone of Agnon's oeuvre, have significance and enduring appeal to contemporary readers for a variety of reasons. They demonstrate the artist taking his craft in a new direction – political satire. The satirist's aspiration is to amuse while arousing the reader's disapproval of societal vice by holding it up to ridicule (with a presumed didactic

and remedial goal). By that measure, even these many decades after they were first published, the stories in this collection continue to both entertain and instruct. Additionally, by experiencing this corner of Agnon's corpus, we witness him in a lighter mode, and are provided with insight into some of his grandest themes, especially in regard to the shortcomings of the Jewish people and polity. By experiencing these themes being played in a minor key we reencounter them with greater appreciation in his *opera magna*.

And yet, when considering the tales in this collection on their own merits, Ariel Hirschfeld draws our attention to the artful elegance, especially of the stories of "The Book of State," through which Agnon expresses his critique of the mechanisms of society, politics, and bureaucracy, which generate important, usually adverse, effects on the State and its citizens. Gershon Shaked suggested that since social satires, by definition, are almost always more straightforwardly allegorical, leading to a more closed and unequivocal text, the genre was ill-suited to typically Agnonian story-telling which always aims for a degree of complexity supporting multiple interpretations. But who is to say how "transparent" these allegories are? Countering Shaked's critique, Hirschfeld asks: Do we truly understand what our title story's orange peel littering the public domain truly represents? Might it not be a symbol pointing in multiple directions, and isn't this a clever enough story to keep multiple ideas in play?

I would suggest that these stories are significant in an additional way, given that they offer a measure of insight into the mind of our most important modern Hebrew author. Agnon was generally reticent about exposing his personal views on matters of the day, preferring to hide between the lines of his stories or behind the mask of his narrator (who is not quite identical with the author). He once claimed that "by nature I am not a political being," and in the Introduction to "The Book of State" the narrator-author confesses his reluctance at undertaking a literary treatment of the State which is "a metaphysical concept rendered into something physical which feigns meta-physicality. When you attempt to approach it as a metaphysical entity it slips back into physicality; if one considers it in physical terms it suddenly reverts into meta-physicality."

In a posthumous record of conversations with Agnon, the author and editor David Cnaani reports him as having declared "The Book of State" to be "just a poor feuilleton [a type of light, jesting story], and I'm sorry that I even published it… I have no desire to criticize the State. We have but one small *medinah'leh*, with so many enemies, and we must protect her." I presume this is an example of Agnon being his typically playful and elusive self. Even if he understood these stories about the *medinah'leh*, that "tiny State," not to be among his greatest works, he intentionally included them when organizing them into a book collection over a decade after the first story in the cycle appeared in the newspaper. However, his comment does highlight the fact that almost all of these stories were first published prior to Israel's 1948 Declaration of Independence. The degree to which his critiques in these works still resonated by the end of his life in 1970, or still do in our present day, is a question that helps them remain compelling reading in the twenty-first century.

In this new collection of Agnon's political satires in English translation we witness the gap between the metaphysical and physical realms, between spirit and concrete, and between ideal and real – the space in which the satirist sharpens his pen like a carving knife, and reveals his opinions from behind the mask of his art. As these stories all treat themes and events in the history of early twentieth-century Zionism, they continue to fascinate contemporary readers by raising questions about the degree to which that gap remains between aspiration and implementation in Jewish life and civic society in the modern State of Israel.

In Agnon's collected works we encounter political satire in two locales. The first comes in "**Young and Old Together**" (originally published in 1920 in the Hebrew quarterly *HaTekufah*), whose title might more literally be translated as "With Our Young and With Our Old." It is Agnon's longest satire, and his first substantial literary treatment of his Galician youth. The object of the satire is something Agnon knew very well first-hand: the young Zionists of Szybusz – Agnon's literary name for his hometown Buczacz (located in today's western Ukraine) – a town whose very name telegraphs the "confusing muddle"

depicted through the plot. The story's title plays off of Y.L. Gordon's Hebrew poem of the same name (which takes its biblical resonance from Exodus 10:9). As opposed to Gordon who saw mass emigration (not necessarily to Palestine *per se*) as the only viable answer to Russian pogroms of the 1880s, Agnon's "Zionist" characters organize banquets and balls. When rumors of anti-Semitic attacks in a neighboring village reach the young men of Szybusz, they board the train in a mission of support. That their initial gallantry is quickly lost amid discussions of the meals sought and eaten once they arrive is a resort to Agnon's general comedic device of depicting Jews tucking in for a meal. Gordon's poem picks up the theme of Jewish unity as a response to a pogrom, and the power of anti-Semitism to unite different strands of the Jewish people. Agnon's story plays off of this source, standing it on its head, as he paints a satirical, reverse portrait of Jewish society in Galicia. (Gordon's poem appears here following the annotations in a first-time English translation by Rhonna Weber Rogol.)

The story is set following the Austrian Parliamentary elections of 1907, and the defeat of Nathan Birnbaum (depicted in our story as Dr. Davidsohn), who stood for election as the regional representative of Buczacz and the surrounding area. Supported by the Jews and Ukrainians, his election was thwarted by alleged corruption on the part of the Poles. The story is told by a narrator, Hemdat, a young Zionist of about twenty years of age, who stands largely outside of the action he relates despite having been a witness to it. Readers of Agnon have come to recognize Hemdat, who makes cameo appearances in a variety of his stories and novels, as the author's most clearly autobiographical projection into his own writing. The annotations to this story point to some of the very many historical events and characters which populate the text, either explicitly or in thinly veiled disguises.

In the course of detailing Jewish life and society as it was, the author gives us his satirized depiction of an array of personalities, personality types, institutions, and issues of the day. Among the objects of his humor (which fluctuates from gentle mocking to acerbic biting) are the pompous windbags who pass as Zionist leaders,

and the cowardice behind their words; the internecine fighting about the purposes of Zionism (whether to ameliorate Jewish suffering in Europe or to build a new Jewish settlement in Palestine); literary figures with inflated egos; the Yiddish vs. Hebrew language wars; arrogance, ignorance, and hypocrisy of rabbis, hasids, and maskilim alike; and the perennial penchant for Jews to act as their own worst enemies despite the external threats of anti-Semitism. Another target of the narrator's scorn is none other than himself: A well-intentioned youth, hungry for fame, yet seemingly incapable of any effective action. An ancillary cause for self-flagellation is the narrator's depiction of the generational divide represented by the conflict between himself and both his father and grandfather, who disapprove of his lax religious commitments and his Zionist affiliations. Hemdat's desire to gain glory as a writer, like that of his author-creator, prevents the fulfillment of his family's aspirations for him as a Torah scholar and rabbi.

The only character not to suffer the author's barbs is Alexander, a Russian Jew who escaped to Szybusz during the Russo-Japanese War. As opposed to the genteel Galician youths, depicted eating, drinking, smoking, and card-playing, Alexander is the sole character to undertake any heroic action when he fights back against a group of drunk policemen harassing a band of Jews. Thrown in prison as a result, Alexander garners neither the pity nor aid of the Szybusz Zionist youth, who see his act as unnecessarily "provoking the *goyim.*"

Agnon tips his hand in the story's concluding lines: "I'm afraid they might send [Alexander] to Siberia," says Hemdat to Mr. Deixel, the pompous student leader, whose very name references his foolishness (Deixel, i.e., "*Di, ksil*," being Hebrew for: *Enough, fool!*). "Deixel rested his nose on the bouquet of flowers in his hand and inhaled the scent, after which he placed his right hand on my shoulder affectionately and said, 'Indeed, there is no complete joy in Exile.' The chains were ancient and were all rusted and were as red as blood. It appeared that the policeman was squeezing Alexander's hand so tightly that his blood was spattering onto the chains. But Mr. Deixel's flowers remained fresh and unwilted." The tragedy of Jewish history is not merely in our treatment at the hands of Gentile powers; just as often it occurs through our own self-inflictions.

Some twenty years after "Young and Old Together" Agnon took up the satirical style once again in a series of short stories published individually, but presented as chapters of a putative "**The Book of State**" (and subsequently gathered with an introduction as "*Perakim shel Sefer HaMedinah*" in his 1950 collection *Samukh veNireh*).

As is common with utopian or dystopian writers (Agnon references Bellamy at one point), who set their stories in faraway lands or times, these satires take place in some imagined future state. Literary scholar Arieh Sachs called these Agnon's Switftian satires, portraying the Jewish society in its soon to be established State as Hebrew-speaking Lilliputians. He is correct in indicating that for Agnon and Swift, writers whose religious convictions undergird their work, pride is the sin that underlies the folly of all states and nations, as opposed to modesty as a religious virtue, and that which undermines God-given reason. Hirschfeld has drawn my attention to the likelihood that Agnon styled the collection's title as "The Book of State" with Plato's *The Republic* in mind, giving us a satirized version of the civic virtues that the great philosopher held in high regard, and the character of a just City-State and its ideal citizen.

Revisiting themes from "Young and Old Together," "**The Kidnappers**" (1942) depicts the confusion of speech-making and ego stroking with actual action or the work of alleviating societal ills. The young idealists who kidnap the blowhard public speaker are no match for his ego, and indeed their attempt to rid the body politic of the disease of windbaggery unwittingly exacerbates the problem.

Picking up on the skewering of politicians, bureaucracy, committees, etc., "**Peace Everlasting**" (1942) additionally satirizes internecine hatred, especially along religious lines. Although, like other stories in the cycle, the revealed text is largely left on the allegorical level, telling us of the tensions between and among the bared-heads and covered-heads, readers will understand the "sects" as representing the secular and religious, and might be forgiven for instantly recalling Dr. Seuss' *The Sneetches*. Both camps become the butt of the joke, but the gravity of the satire is apparent as we readers are reminded at the conclusion that while the factions were fighting amongst themselves, the foreign enemies were amassing at the border, presumably

enjoying the scene as the residents of the State accomplish the aims of their own foes. A side-plot in the short story contains a satirical punch at the *Va'ad HaLashon HaIvrit* – the Hebrew Language Committee, of which Agnon was once a member, but with which he maintained a strained relationship. In fact, the year of this story's publication saw Agnon's resignation from the Committee, and the lampooning of committee work in "Peace Everlasting" no doubt has a connection to this event.

"**The Orange Peel**" (1939), our volume's title story, and the most well known of those in this collection, presents the narrator (who, again, we are meant to presume is a stand-in for the author himself), the self-styled "Author of the Book of State." This fellow attempts to remove a piece of refuse from the public square while others stand about debating the negligence of the State's ability to accomplish simple municipal tasks – from the most exalted officials down to the common street-sweepers. The narrator is fined for garbage removal without a license – in fact, he is the one man in the State who attempts to actively solve societal problems with his own two hands, and is rewarded by being indicted for disturbing the peace. Along the model of "for want of a nail the kingdom was lost," the small orange peel causes a chain reaction of spills, pratfalls, accidents and backups. The farce features grammarians, land-jobbers, journalists, busy-body wives of elected officials, Orthodox Jews, and a general assembly of indignant gabbers – each unhappy citizen unhappy in his own way, and each only too happy to instruct the "Author" on what should be done. In the end, the garbage remains in place, presumably to cause further nuisance, but the "Author," too, is left alone, as the policeman doesn't have time to bring him down to the station, not wanting to miss his lunch hour. Once again we have a send-up of bureaucratic inefficiencies, but also of the dehumanizing component of living life as a cog in a larger collective – a theme that occupied Agnon in a variety of ways throughout his career.

A plan to tax walking sticks and canes, the only items heretofore untaxed, in order to generate revenue and prevent a general strike among the State's workers and clerks is the subject of "**On Taxes**" (1950). The plan leads to a predictable chain of absurdities,

exposing government graft and incompetence. Punchlines about the accomplishment of anything put together by a committee are too well known to even reference here. Despite being the only story in the collection to be penned after the establishment of the actual State of Israel which these tales lampoon, "On Taxes" depicts an abstract setting without specific reference to time or place. Aside from a passing mention of the idea that the State's "founding fathers were Jews" and that Hebrew is spoken there, all four of these stories might be depicting any modern state, with the "Author" presented as an Everyman. In his inability to accomplish this or that task, Agnon's narrator – his so-called dramatized ego – becomes stymied by the world he encounters. Despite our pleasure at the comic turns these stories take, the author-narrator – unlike Sholem Aleichem's *schlemiels* – has to manage devoid of humor, slapstick or otherwise, because these tales capture something of the high anxiety generated by the encounter with modernity in all its guises. As opposed to "Young and Old Together," where Deixel and Co. are pompous buffoons, and undermine the Zionist cause they claim to promote, in "The Book of State" the very institutionalizing of these archetypes into the machinery of bureaucracy – itself a partial fulfillment of Zionism's aspirations – gives rise to malice and evil. Instead of being pointed at the individual speech-makers and paper-pushers, these satires reach razor sharpness when targeting the collective.

Prof. E.E. Urbach noted internal connections and motifs in these stories, as well as in the surrealistic, modernistic tales in "The Book of Deeds" (*Sefer HaMa'asim*), also contained in *Samukh veNireh*. They all examine the actions of individuals in the framework of larger society, as depicted nightmarishly in "The Book of Deeds" when the narrator, wishing to perform some seemingly mundane task – mail a letter, catch a bus, reach his home, celebrate a holiday, etc. – becomes entrenched in complications put forth by some larger force, leading him to helplessness and deviance from his path. As journalist Ari Shavit recently observed, "As the State became everything, the individual was marginalized." "The Book of State" stories, while not "Kafkaesque" in the same way (a comparison Agnon bridled at),

humorously show how a private citizen attempts to save the State from its troubles and enemies, while the State turns its citizens into fools and knaves, depriving them of their liberty. Whether deterred by heaven above (in *Sefer HaMa'asim*) or a committee chamber below (in *Sefer HaMedinah*) the narrator never stands a chance.

The first two sections of this anthology touch on certain common themes and strike similar notes in ways that should be obvious to the reader. Please note that these two works, "Young and Old Together" and the collection that makes up "The Book of State," do not appear in the same volume of Agnon's Hebrew writings. Nevertheless, despite their similarities as political satires, when placed side by side the element that separates them should become distinctly pronounced. While they both explore issues of Jewish use of power and the effects of powerlessness, alongside skewering Jews as agents of that power, as well as depicting those on whom the agents act, they do so from opposite vectors. "Young and Old Together," set in the *alte heim* in 1907, portrays the effects of *insufficient* Jewish power, a few short decades before the catastrophic events that neither the characters nor Agnon (writing in 1920) could have possibly imagined. "The Book of State" stands on the other side of the historic breach, foreseeing Jewish sovereignty in a Jewish State, yet understanding that it would be neither a messianic nor a utopian era. There would still be objects to satirize, and that in and of itself is reason enough to mourn – the subject of our anthology's third section, "**Introduction to the Kaddish**" (1947).

While he could allow himself to be satirical in regard to the Zionist enterprise, or the State during its founding, at a certain point his thinking took a decidedly un-comedic turn. Agnon appended his "Introduction to the Kaddish" as a coda to "The Book of State" stories when they were collected in book form. While we have no indication from him why he did this, we know that the organization of material within each collection was done deliberately, and we can speculate that the placement of this profoundly serious, short, liturgical piece was motivated by both religious and Zionist fidelities. To read any element of satire or cynicism into it (as some mistakenly have) is a disservice to the work and its author.

Following a medieval tradition of a poetic "*petiḥah*" (opening) to a prayer, in which the themes of the piece of worship to be introduced are highlighted or expanded, Agnon prepared this introduction to the Mourner's Kaddish in 1947 to be recited "for the fallen defenders of the Land of Israel." James A. Diamond trenchantly points out that the expansion of the well-known Kaddish was necessary in 1947, as the tally of the Six Million was still being undertaken, and the human sacrifices in defense of the fledgling Jewish homeland were growing day by day. It is composed against the question of what it means to salvage the religious metaphors of serving and standing guard at the palace of a King who may have appeared to have abandoned His troops. But even in this most serious of works, the themes of "The Book of State" are reflected, albeit in a wholly somber tone: the sanctity and supremacy of each individual, even when he is marshaled as part of an army arrayed in defense of the collective body politic.

> *Each one of us is as important in His eyes as a whole regiment.*
> *For He does not have many to set in our place.*
> *Thus if one Jew dies (God forbid),*
> *Distress falls upon the regiments of the King,*
> *And a weakening comes to the kingdom of He who is Blessed,*
> *For His kingdom lacks one of its regiments*
> *And the greatness of He who is Blessed is lessened.*

The death of each individual causes a lessening of God's kingdom on earth, therefore we recite the Kaddish, imploring *Yitgadal ve-yitkadash shemah raba* – praying that His name should be magnified on high to rectify His own diminution caused by the loss of each member of the collective below. As opposed to treatments of this theme in his works of fiction, this is Agnon's attempt to compose liturgy (indeed, it is still ceremoniously recited at Memorial Day events throughout Israel). Unlike so much of his writing, he does not here create a pastiche of holy source material in an ironic subversion of those pious texts. Writing in Jerusalem in 1947, as the ashes in

Europe were first settling, and the conflagration in *Eretz Yisrael* was just beginning, he set satire aside.

## *Acknowledgements*

"The Kidnappers," translated by Isaac Franck appeared first in *Jewish Frontier* 39:4 (May 1972), pp. 9-12. "Peace Everlasting," translated by Jules Harlow, appeared first in *Conservative Judaism* 19:2 (Winter 1965), pp. 32-39. "Introduction to the Kaddish," translated by Samuel H. Dresner, appeared first in *Conservative Judaism* 11:2 (Winter 1957), pp. 2-4. These three stories are republished here in revised and modified form. All other translations, and all annotations of the stories, are original to this volume.

The opportunity to collaborate with translators Sara Daniel and the duo of Paul Pinchas Bashan and Rhonna Weber Rogol was as pleasant as it was enriching, and provided me with fresh insights into these stories. Rabbi Jules Harlow very graciously participated in reexamining and revising his translation of "Peace Everlasting," now a half-century after its initial publication.

I am grateful to the following scholars of Hebrew literature, fellow Agnonists all, for their encouragement and assistance in the research for this volume: Omer Bartov, Haim Be'er, Hillel Halkin, Avraham and Toby Holtz, Rachel Manekin, Elchanan Reiner, Avi Shmidman, Rafi Weiser, and Hillel Weiss. Ariel Hirschfeld and Alan Mintz have been especially helpful as friends, teachers, and guides.

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