

BRIDGING THE UNBRIDGEABLE DIVIDE BETWEEN RELIGION AND SECULAR MODERNITY

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To the great Hebrew writer S.Y. Agnon, balance is all—and imbalance, as in the novel *Only Yesterday*, a devastating calamity.

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In 2006, a distinguished American Jewish essayist took the occasion of his 50th high-school reunion to reflect in *Commentary* on the decisions made a half-century earlier in “a period of my life now hardly recognizable to myself.” At the end of eighth grade, he had faced a choice between two divergent educational paths. On the one path lay a yeshiva, regarded by his parents as “the portals of obscurantism” but a logical choice for a young man then flirting with Orthodox Judaism. On the other path lay one of America’s most prestigious public high schools. In the end, hearkening to the voice of his “evil inclination,” he decided to drop Jewish education entirely and to leave behind the parochial religious *velt* in order to “be in the *world*. It had never occurred to me until then that the world was something I felt deprived of.”



The Rishon LeZion band in the early 20th century.

In picking this path, the memoirist remarks in retrospect, he was acting on the presupposition, common enough at the time, that such a move represented a clear binary choice. In general, he writes, “We were told [then] to think in terms of ‘either/or,’ not of ‘both/and.’” And yet, unbeknownst to him, the wider “world” that he’d chosen to enter was itself in the process of changing—and so dramatically as to make his adolescent self a person “on the verge of becoming an anachronism. By the time I was a student,” he observes,

an understanding between Judaism and modernity was already being reached.
Religious faith had ceased to be an issue in Jewish literary and even religious life.

Orthodoxy, which had been in headlong retreat for over a century, had rallied and was holding the line.

In short, had he stood at the same crossroad just a few years later, he might have found a way to balance both/and.

I recalled this memoir while reading the [new essay](#) by Hillel Halkin on S.Y. Agnon's Hebrew novel *Only Yesterday* (*T'mol Shilshom*). To many a reader and critic of Agnon over the decades, this peerless fictional portrait of Jewish Palestine during the Second Aliyah (1904-1914) has seemed the quintessential treatment of the tension between religion and secularism, faith and heresy, tradition and modernity.

As Halkin summarizes the novel's plot, Yitzhak Kummer, a young Galician immigrant to the Land of Israel, is torn between secular Jaffa and religious Jerusalem, between his pious East European upbringing and the bohemian Zionist farmers and artists in the "New Yishuv," between the sexually experienced arms of Sonia and the chaste affections of Shifrah.

Here is Agnon's portrait of the young immigrant rationalizing his abandonment of Jewish religious observance and entry into the secularizing environment of Jaffa:

If Yitzhak thought about it at all, he was vaguely guided by the notion that the Jews of Palestine were divided into an Old Yishuv and a New Yishuv, each with its customs. Since he belonged to the new one, why keep those of the old one? . . . He was not the only one. Jaffa was full of ex-yeshiva students. Sometimes, when getting together, they waxed nostalgic over ḥasidic tales and melodies or imitations of rabbinic sermons. The generation before theirs had sung songs of Zion. Their generation had had enough of these.

A reader attuned to the biblical cadences of the phrase "songs of Zion" in this passage will recall Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. ...

For there they that carried us away captive . . . required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.

For the psalmist, songs of Zion could not be sung on foreign soil; the very mention of them was an urgent reminder never to forget Jerusalem. But the young *ḥalutsim* in Agnon's novel, already dwelling in the new Zion, had indeed forgotten "Jerusalem," now identified as the world of tradition left behind in Eastern Europe and kept alive in Palestine itself only by the anti-Zionist Ḥaredim in Jerusalem.

We're in a universe, in short, of either/or, where all choices are binary choices. Of course, Halkin stipulates, *Only Yesterday* also offers exceptions to the rule. Among them in Jaffa is

the religious Zionist Yakov Malkov who presides over the boarding house in the excerpt presented by Halkin at the head of his essay. Contrarily, even in the holy city of Jerusalem there are “militant secularists . . . such as the students and teachers . . . at the Bezalel School of Arts, or the circle around [the philologist and so-called reviver of the Hebrew language] Eliezer Ben-Yehudah.” To these we can add minor characters like the eccentrics Bloykop (an artist) and Arzef (a taxidermist): “religious personalities with a firm compass in life that is not oriented either to Jewish observance or to pioneering Zionism [and who demonstrate] other possibilities of personal and Jewish fulfillment in Palestine than those offered by the New and Old Yishuv.”

Still, Halkin insists, all of these remain exceptions. “[T]hough geographically the two cities [of Jaffa and Jerusalem] were only several hours apart by train, the journey between them was one between two worlds.”

And that is not all. In the background of this dialectical struggle, played out over 600 pages by a wide-ranging cast of characters, a variety of settings, and dozens and dozens of brilliantly rendered episodes, stands the dog Balak, the novel’s perfect supporting actor. Ever since his first appearance in Agnon’s writing (in 1934, a decade before his full-fledged debut in *Only Yesterday*), Balak has led generations of critics—as if pulled along at the end of a leash—to one interpretation after another of his symbolic significance. Most, perhaps, are variations on the reading by the scholar Gershon Shaked, whose Freudian analysis of the text sees Balak as the psychic externalization of Yitzhak’s sinful, rebellious self—a kind of dark alter ego whose pursuit of the young man only intensifies after Yitzhak returns to traditional observance and weds the pious Shifrah. Chained to Yitzhak like the rabid dog he has become, Balak will at last deliver the bite that kills him.

To this summary of the novel’s action and central “problem” I would, however, add another important exceptional figure whom Halkin does not name. This is Rabbi Menaḥemke, or, as he is called, “Standing” Menaḥem, “because he did everything standing up.” Menaḥem is portrayed by Agnon as a living, breathing rebuttal of the supposed contradiction between traditional Judaism and Zionism: a pious farmer working the land of Petaḥ Tikvah (just as Yitzhak himself had aspired to do upon first arriving in Palestine) with a pitchfork in one hand and a volume of Talmud in the other.

Aside from Yitzhak himself, Menaḥem is the only other character in the novel to appear both in Jaffa with its nearby settlements *and* in Jerusalem. But where Yitzhak is ultimately destroyed by the struggle between the two worlds, Menaḥem finds a way to synthesize the two opposites and inhabit the “both/and” that the novel’s “either/or” protagonists are unwilling or, as in the case of Yitzhak, unable to attain.

Throughout *Only Yesterday*, the Hebrew term for this “both/and” option is *midat hishtavut*—a quality of harmonious serenity achieved through equanimity and balance. While the term is mentioned in rabbinic and later in ḥasidic literature, Agnon may have come to it via his long personal relationship with the sainted Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935).

Without alluding to the ideal of *hishtavut* explicitly, Halkin repeatedly puts his finger on the central issue of balance—and on the perils that lie in wait for too-desperate seekers after that

elusive condition. In his own return to the world of religious observance, Yitzhak is in search of that very goal (and also of the hand of Shifrah); in a scene of him reciting kaddish for his mother at the Western Wall, he even seems to have reached it. But not so fast. As Halkin writes,

Yitzhak's regression to [the ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem neighborhood of] Meah She'arim does not come from his inability to "shake off the dust of exile." It comes from shaking off too much of it by throwing religion and its values overboard in a Jaffa in which his friends do not even say kaddish for their fathers. This undermines his Jewish and human equilibrium, [but] in an attempt to regain it, he lurches too far in the other direction.

Indeed, Yitzhak's "Jewish and human equilibrium," sealed by his marriage to Shifrah, is altogether shattered in the novel's tragic conclusion with Yitzhak bound to a bed, ravaged by the bite of the demonic and diseased Balak, a dog driven mad by words painted on him in the past by none other than Yitzhak himself. What Yitzhak has actually discovered in Jerusalem is not *hishtavut* but the eternal return of the repressed.

Yitzhak is thus a very different case from Menaḥem. In a piece of dialogue between the two men, Agnon beautifully reveals how Yitzhak can never achieve the state that Menaḥem embodies effortlessly (the following passage is adapted from Barbara Harshav's somewhat problematic translation):

Said Yitzhak, When I look at myself, I'm sorry I didn't stand the test and didn't become a farmer. Said Menaḥem, No matter what, you would be sorry. Said Yitzhak, What reason do you have to say that? Said Menaḥem, Everyone who is sorry about the thing he didn't do will be sorry about every single thing. Yitzhak asked Menaḥem, And what could a person do not to be sorry? Said Menaḥem, You're asking me? I don't know what sorrow is. Said Yitzhak, That is, you are happy with your lot? Said Menaḥem, I don't know what happiness is. Said Yitzhak, That is, you have reached a state of equanimity [*hishtavut*]? Said Menaḥem, That state I haven't reached, but if a day passes and I'm not ashamed of it, I'm satisfied.

Ironically, while Yitzhak believes he has attained *hishtavut* upon settling in Jerusalem and entered into married bliss, the novel's conclusion belies the claim, and shows his achievement to have been, at best, fleeting. Unable to find the desired balance, Yitzhak is yet aware of its existence, which only sharpens the tragedy of his own failure. Late in *T'mol Shilshom*, in a symbol-charged dream that follows immediately upon his final encounter with Menaḥem, Yitzhak sees himself

in the street barefoot without shoes, his head bare. He heard the sound of prayer and followed the sound. He came to a two-story house, the bottom story in ruins and you climbed a ladder to the top story where they were praying. And the ladder stood straight. He leaned the ladder [against the wall] and ascended. When he put his head in, the door closed on him from inside and his body was outside.

Yitzhak's hatless and shoeless condition—the novel is replete with images of hats and shoes, meant perhaps to remind the reader of “that which is above and that which is below” (cf. Mishnah Hagigah 2:1)—telegraphs his disconnection from both the earthly and the heavenly Jerusalem. So, too, does his suspended condition, hanging off the building's second story, at once inside and outside, unable to gain access to the prayers being recited above.

In the novel, this dream stands in for the fate of many young people of the Second Aliyah in their unsuccessful attempt to combine the thesis-and-antithesis, as they persisted in seeing it, of traditional observance and Zionism. Yitzhak is undone by that struggle.

Halkin's summary is precise. “*Only Yesterday's* ending,” he writes forthrightly, “is aimed at the Labor Zionist ideology that romanticized and mythologized the figure of the *haluts*, making it a yardstick by which all other forms of Zionism were judged lacking.” Indeed, he points out that it is these same Labor Zionists—“our stalwart brothers in Kinneret and Merhavia, in Eyn-Ganim and Um-Guni, as Degania once was called”—whom the narrator addresses directly in the novel's final paragraph. To them, the narrator holds up the cautionary example of “our friend Yitzhak” who, although he “never got to plow, sow, and farm,” was nevertheless, like “other pious Jews, . . . granted a grave in the Holy Land”—and not only a grave but also, one is tempted to add, the monument that is this very book. (Halkin goes too far, I think, in characterizing this passage as “parody” or “burlesque.”)

True, the narrator's caution can be seen as bi-directional: after all, the world of Meah She'arim, especially as encapsulated in the fanatical figure of Shifrah's father Reb Feysh, is itself mocked throughout the novel with both farce and fury. But neither Agnon nor his narrator had reason to fear that the *halutsim* and *kibbutznikim* of Degania stood in any danger of reverting to the caftans and prayer houses of Meah She'arim. Even in satirizing the *haredi* world, Agnon was presenting a back-handed critique of the secular Zionists in whose lives there was too much Jaffa and too little Jerusalem, and whose greatest breakthroughs were in consequence haunted by what they strove to supplant.

One can extend and generalize this point beyond a single group or a single generation. As in so much of Agnon's work, *Only Yesterday* presents a cunningly intricate study of the multifarious ways in which the past inevitably exerts its pull over the present and the future. Halkin is thus fully justified in ending his essay with this keen statement: “*Only Yesterday* is a novel about the loss of balance in one young man and its possible loss in an entire people.”

But what of that other young man whom I mentioned at the start, the one whose binary choice in the mid-1950s of a public high school over a yeshiva is the subject of a memoir in *Commentary* by his older self a half-century later, and who came to my mind in reading Hillel Halkin's new essay in *Mosaic*?

As it happens, like the artist Bloykop and the taxidermist Arzef in *Only Yesterday*, the young memoirist-to-be would also find other possibilities of personal and Jewish fulfillment in the land of Israel. Fortunately, by the time he arrived there in 1970 (by coincidence, the year of Agnon's death), the choice he'd faced, or thought he'd faced, as an adolescent in New York—the either/or choice between Judaism and “the world”—was no longer so sharply delineated even in his new home.

Indeed, the Israel of 1970 would have been only partially recognizable by Yitzhak, Menahem, Sonia, or others of Agnon's characters. To be sure, Shifrah, her father Reb Feysh, and even the dog Balak might still have felt at home in Meah She'arim, but our memoirist did not head there. Rather, he settled in Zikhron Yaakov, not far from the agricultural settlements that Yitzhak and "our brethren of the Second Aliyah" dreamed of farming. And there he would forge a new "both/and" identity for himself through a deep commitment to and ceaseless engagement with Jewish life, literature, and learning, distilled over the decades in the form of innumerable translations from Hebrew and Yiddish as well as in English-language books and essays whose insights have redounded to the lasting benefit of devoted readers around the world, especially in Israel and among his many American Jewish friends.

The memoirist's name is of course Hillel Halkin, whose now-concluded ten-part series in *Mosaic* on the enduring relevance of modern Hebrew authors takes its place among the permanent gifts to Jewish self-understanding from the pen of a unique artist functioning at the height of his powers.