

Hebrew's Nobel Prize

On the 50th anniversary of S.Y. Agnon's acceptance speech

By Jeffrey Saks | December 9, 2016 12:00 AM

S.Y. Agnon, well past the prime of his life and capped by his large black yarmulke, looking somewhat ridiculous in his white tie and tuxedo tails, ascended the stage to receive his Nobel Prize exactly 50 years ago tomorrow. At the time he was the first Israeli and, to this day, the only Hebrew author so fêted. At the Nobel banquet, standing before the King of Sweden and reciting the customary blessing prescribed by the Talmud upon being in the presence of royalty, Agnon declared that he felt compelled to explain who he was and from whence he—and his art—had sprung. What resulted, however, was a most remarkable description of Jewish history (and presumably his place within it) and the impact of the arc of that history on Hebrew literature and Jewish storytelling. In telling his life's story he harked back nearly 2,000 years and **said**: “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 explain that as a descendant of the Levites, the Temple choristers, he felt the destruction of Jerusalem most profoundly:

In a dream, in a vision of the night, I saw myself standing with my brother-Levites in the Holy Temple, 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.

If taken at face value (and so little in Agnon should be taken only at face value), he is declaring that his literary gift and artistic output are some forms of divine compensation and consolation for the tragedies of destruction and exile. Destined to be a singer of the Temple Psalms, but prevented from his destiny by the vicissitudes of history, he has been divinely tasked to write in prose what was formerly sung in praise.

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—he described 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 theme, that writing and storytelling become a balm for pain, runs throughout Agnon's work. One need not be steeped in the working of Jewish *Midrash* to understand 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. This type of multilayered writing (and reading) is at the core of Agnon's genius, and why a writer who—on the surface—is so steeped in the “old world” of eastern European Judaism, can be simultaneously read and understood as one of the greatest modernist authors. In almost every case, if reading any of the stories in his collected writings leads you to think Agnon has merely piously retold an old Hasidic tale, you are not fathoming what is written between the lines, nor are you hearing the ironic tones which accompany the work.



(Photo courtesy Agnon House, Jerusalem)

Perhaps no selection better demonstrates these themes than Agnon's 1954 short story *Forevermore*, among his most enigmatic works, and the object of continual fascination for critics. It contains a compelling "story within a story" as the hero's modern life in Jerusalem resonates with the ancient history that exercises a gravitational pull on the present. It is the story of a compulsive academic, searching for the "truth" that eludes him in his scholarly pursuits. Adiel Amzeh, that cloistered scholar, has been at work for 20 years attempting to unravel the secrets of an ancient city, now reduced to dust and ashes, and to uncover it he is willing to pay with his own life—a sacrifice he makes in the present in order to recover the past. *Forevermore* is an (unstable) allegory with meaning for today's readers and contemporary Jewish history, and part of that meaning is encased in the symbolism of books, writing, nature of the artist's calling of an author, and the relationship of all these to the "historic catastrophe," and personal and national pain, alluded to in Stockholm in 1966.

Forevermore is a heroically tragic tale (at least it can support one such reading), and Amzeh's encounter with the lost text he seeks can be read as a meta-reflection on Agnon's view of books and reading, their power in our lives and the lives of nations and cultures, and their ability to harness their power to experience pain and draw consolation:

And when Adiel Amzeh read the story, he shed many tears. How great is the true writer, he thought, who does not abandon his work even when the sword of death hangs over his neck, who writes with his very blood, in his soul's own script, what his eyes have seen! ... Yet learning bestows a special blessing on those who are not put off easily. Yes, Adiel Amzeh would ask himself for what and for whom he was working. But Wisdom herself would take hold of him and whisper: "Sit, my love, sit and do not leave me." So he would sit and discover new things which had been unknown to all the learned men of the ages until he came and revealed them. And since there were many things and learning is endless and there is much to discover and investigate and understand, he did not put his work aside and did not leave his place and he remained there forevermore.

The contemporary encounter with Agnon's writing, its artistry, richness, complexity, and sophistication, still has the power to demonstrate to the reader that Agnon was indeed one of the "great, true writers"—like that encountered so powerfully by Amzeh. I am often asked, usually by Israelis demonstrating their natural chauvinism for the most decorated Hebrew author, how anyone could possibly understand Agnon in translation. How could that Nobel committee have recognized his greatness without encountering him in the original? For readers unfamiliar with the complex weaving of Agnon's texts with the master texts of biblical and rabbinic literature, there is no doubt that **much is lost in translation** (as it is for contemporary Hebrew readers ignorant of those Ur-texts—a contingency which was all too rare in Agnon's heyday, and one whose current ubiquity would have caused him alarm). But for those concerned with the great issues of Jewish life, living, and learning—even at a remove of a half-century and more, the encounter with Agnon's **fiction** still provides a compelling treatment of those themes, done so through the distillation of millennia of Jewish scholarship and storytelling, recast into the mold of modern literature. "Sit, my love, sit and do not leave me," those ancient texts call to us from between the lines and across the transformation they have undergone in Agnon's writing.

To read more about the writer S.Y. Agnon, as well as his fiction, in *Tablet* magazine, [click here](#). Jeffrey Saks's lecture on Agnon's Nobel Prize speech, delivered last month at Yeshiva University's Center for Israel Studies, can be viewed [here](#).

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