

THE OUTCAST & OTHER TALES

INCLUDING STORIES FROM
“THE BOOK OF DEEDS”

S.Y. AGNON

EDITED AND ANNOTATED BY
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The Toby Press

Series Afterword & Acknowledgements

WITH THE COMPLETION OF THIS FIFTEENTH AND FINAL VOLUME in the S.Y. Agnon Library it is my pleasant duty to share some concluding thoughts and acknowledge with gratitude the very many people who have been sources of learning and support for me in bringing these 5,000-plus pages of Agnon's Nobel-winning Hebrew prose to an English-reading audience. It has been our desire that readers should encounter Agnon's work with an appreciation for his accomplishment on an aesthetic and literary level, and not be deprived by an inability to read him in the original Hebrew. If some have been inspired to venture into the fullness of the Hebrew texts, we are pleased.

I am often asked (usually by Israelis possessed with natural chauvinism for the Hebrew language), How is it possible to translate Agnon? How can Agnon possibly be read in English? I usually point out that the Nobel committee judges, who also read only in translation, were still able to identify his uniqueness and the essential characteristics of his work, aside from the sheer literary enjoyment. In Stockholm a half-century ago, Ingvar Andersson, on behalf of the Swedish Academy, told Agnon: "In your writing we meet once again the ancient unity between literature and science, as antiquity knew it. In one of your stories you say that some will no doubt read it as they read fairy tales, others will read it for edification. Your great chronicle of the Jewish people's spirit

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and life has therefore a manifold message. For the historian it is a precious source, for the philosopher an inspiration, for those who cannot live without literature it is a mine of never-failing riches. We honor in you a combination of tradition and prophecy, of saga and wisdom.”

But in my heart, I answer my Israeli interlocutor’s question with a question of my own: *Yedidi*, dear friend, do not ask how Agnon can be read in English. Ask if he can still be read in Hebrew? The answer to that question is similarly affirmative, but with the same type of reservation we might have for the English-reading audience: It depends on what gets “lost in translation”—from Hebrew to English or from Hebrew to “Israeli.” The master was writing for a population that was still in dialogue with the classic Jewish bookshelf. That can no longer be taken for granted, and any alienation from Agnon’s writing in Israel today is a barometer for Jewish civilization’s remove from itself, in any language. If we are witnessing a renewed interest in Hebrew’s only Nobel laureate, evident during last year’s fiftieth anniversary of his receipt of the literary prize, and perhaps attested to with the existence of this series of books, these are encouraging signs indeed.

Agnon’s creative achievement was in the weaving of his texts with the mastertexts of biblical and rabbinic literature, and the annotations in the series have been aimed at helping readers encounter that “Jewish bookshelf” and gain an appreciation for how Agnon distilled millennia of Jewish scholarship and storytelling, recasting it into the mold of modern literature. But I hope that readers of the very many and varied stories, novellas and novels have also come to appreciate what is perhaps his greatest creation: S.Y. Agnon himself. In almost every one of the tales in the *Collected Writings* we encounter a narrator which the reader presumes is a projection of the author himself. Some readers, and even some critics, fall into the trap of mistaking the narrator for the actual autobiographical voice of Agnon (a trap we imagine the author set for his readers quite intentionally). In fact, this persona—a man learned of the law and lore, who knows the intimate thoughts and feelings of his characters populating the streets of his hometown Buczacz, and his imagined birthplace Jerusalem, living in the 18th or 19th century in Jewish towns and *shtetls* of Europe, Jaffa of the Second *Aliya*, Germany of World War I—becomes the mouthpiece through

which his creator serves as the great scribe of a Jewish world in transition. As if to blur the lines between author and narrator, Agnon's own autobiography becomes a work of fiction: Not only is the narrator often "unreliable," so was S.Y. Agnon. He was, of course, born as Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes, choosing his symbolically weighted penname from the title of an early story. Even his date of birth was a fable: Claiming to have been born on August 8, 1888 (the numerically lyrical 8.8.88), which fell out on Tishah B'Av—the date of Jewish national calamity and Exile, but also the very date which contains the seeds of future redemption. It has long been known that these fictions were part of the myth he wove about himself (in fact he was born a year earlier, on August 8, 1887, but that day does not coincide with Tishah B'Av in either year). None of these facts are important to the reader, who would be better served by keeping his or her eye on Agnon the character, not Czaczkes the man. Pay attention to the way he presents his voice and vision in telling the story of the Jewish people through literature. In order to do this he transforms himself into a character, entering the work of art itself and speaking to us from within. It is for this reason that the biographical material presented along with this series has cited 1888 as his "date of birth"; fully aware that this is biographically false, we nevertheless are pointing to the "birth" of Agnon the "narrating character," his most compelling creation of all.

MY THANKS GO TO THE MANY FRIENDS AND TEACHERS who have shared their wisdom and scholarship with me during these years of intensive Agnon research and study, including Robert Alter, Omer Bartov, Avraham and Toby Holtz, David Roskies, Hillel Weiss, and Ruth Wisse. Haim Be'er, Ariel Hirschfeld, and Rafi Weiser are to be singled out for the strength of their encouragement, wisdom of their council, and warmth of their friendship.

With the conclusion of this series I am reminded of my debt to two important teacher-friends, Shalom Carmy and Daniel Maron, each of whom asked in his own way: Have you read Agnon?

I am also grateful to those many translators we have worked with in producing new translations, as well as to those whose previously published works were revised and anthologized in the series. Hillel

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A commitment to Jewish life, learning and culture is part of what makes Toby Press and its parent house, Koren Publishers, the premier publishers of Jewish texts and Hebrew literature in translation. Matthew Miller's leadership, and the able assistance of the staff, including Tani Bayer, Gila Fine, Yehudit Singer, and particularly Tomi Mager, have greatly benefitted me, especially in the technical aspects of my work this series.

When I began my journey into what became this series I had the great good fortune of being befriended by James S. Diamond and Alan Mintz. It is both painful and unimaginable that I have reached the "finish line" of the Agnon Library bereft of their friendship and *chavrusaschaft*. May their memory and the memory of their teachings remain for a blessing.

Jeffrey Saks

Series Editor, S.Y. Agnon Library

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Agnon's 129th Birthday