

303PW77

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## RABBIS AND SCHOLARS

## THE CRISIS OF THE RABBINATE

"And these are the names of the early rabbis who reigned in Buczacz. . . ." (301). In these, the opening words of Book Two of *'Ir umelo'ah*, we may well pause over Agnon's choice to have his narrator use the language of kingship to describe the role of Buczacz's community rabbis. When referring to the Polish magnates who exerted total authority over the city, the narrator uses the term *mashlu*, "they ruled"; but when it comes to the rabbis and heads of the rabbinic court, it is always *malkhu*, "they reigned." The lists of rabbis the narrator goes on to present, in the high chronicle mode he has adopted, resemble nothing so much as the king lists in the book of Genesis.

The notion of rabbi-kings reigning over Jewish city-states in an autonomous Polish Jewish commonwealth lies at the heart of Agnon's normative vision of East European Jewish life in the early modern age. Normative, as we have been using it in this study, connotes an ideal type, a structure of value, a collective aspiration, a choice of how to organize the memory of the past. The fiction represents the constraints on these norms and the departures from them, but the norms themselves always remain palpable in the ground beneath the fiction. There is undoubtedly a polemical charge to the assertion of this norm of autonomy. Agnon is conducting an embroiled dialogue with Zionist historiography. On the one hand, as himself a religious Zionist, he is projecting the categories of nationalism backward onto the history of the Jews in Eastern Europe and claiming their experiences for Zionism. Buczacz came into being as an accidental way-station for German Jews who had set out to ascend to Zion, according to the myth of origins that opens *'Ir umelo'ah*. And once they were settled and able, the Jews of Buczacz and other settlements sought to create self-sufficient and self-governing Jewish polities. On the other hand, writing in the 1950s and 1960s, Agnon is doing battle with the nativist Zionism of Ben-Gurion and the young men from the youth movements who fought in the War of Independence. For them, the establishment of Israel represented victory over the Exile, which was conceived of as a gentile-ridden and shame-inducing aberration that made Jews dependent for survival upon the obfuscations of religions. Against this view, Agnon presents Buczacz as a highly evolved corporate organism that deployed a politics appropriate to the challenges that faced it and, in the best of times, maintained a balance between this-worldliness and religious culture.

Agnon widens the focus from Buczacz to the totality of Polish and Lithuanian Jewry at the conclusion to the introduction to the two great narratives about rabbis in Book Two. In decrying the forced disbanding in 1764 of the Council of Four Lands, the quasi-legislative body that governed Polish and Lithuanian Jewry for almost two hundred years, Agnon's narrator makes this claim.

A nation worn down and vexed<sup>1</sup> which, lacking the force of a monarch and his ministers and possessing only the authority of the Torah, comes together to formulate and promulgate decrees and ordinances that are accepted by the entire people like the edicts of kings. When a king establishes a police force to subdue the people by rod and whip and impose his decrees, they flaunt those decrees, and many are the rebels who sin against the king's will. Yet the holy

**Comment [JS1]:** Agnon is just using the לשון חז"ל

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people Israel willingly accepted all that was placed upon them by the eminences of the Council of the Lands, which was like the Sanhendrin in the Chamber of Hewn Stone in the Temple. (308)

Now, our proud chronicler may be guilty of over-praising his coreligionists and denigrating the workings of the gentile regime, but his claim is profound and far-reaching. Despite the fact the Jews had no state and were ruled by others, they contrived to constitute themselves as a self-governing commonwealth, and they were able to do so because of the universally accepted authority of the Torah, which purchased compliance out of respect rather than fear. Rather than religious belief being a surrogate for true national existence, as argued by the standard Zionist critique of the diaspora, it is in fact the opposite. It is the allegiance to the Torah that allowed Jews to maintain a coherent corporate existence under conditions of adversity.

The sway of Torah, according to the normative worldview of the narrator, depends upon the true rabbis who reign over the poleis that make up this vast invisible Jewish state. The true rabbi-king is both a scholar and a decisor (*poseq*). He studies and teaches Torah for its own sake and at the same time functions as a judge who interprets the law and applies it to concrete ritual and commercial problems. He is the *mara de'atra*, literally, the master of the locality, the religious authority of the community in which he serves; and, if his legal opinions are astute and published in book form, his authority will be recognized beyond his locality and bring him, and his town, fame.

In truth, however, the chronicler's image of the rabbi-king reigning over the Jewish city-state is a norm that bears a tangled relationship to historical actuality. Far from being sovereign, all rabbis were employees of the kahal and served for limited terms at the pleasure of the community's lay leadership. (A précis of such a letter of rabbinic appointment, a contract delineating duties and compensation, appears in the very beginning of the great saga about the quest for a rabbi for Buczacz [312-13].) Although the rabbi had authority in legal and ritual matters, his employment ultimately depended upon his acceptability to the wealthy householders who controlled the kahal. But the constraints on rabbinic autonomy did not come only from within the Jewish community. In many cases the office of rabbi was a leasehold that had to be purchased from the magnate who owned the town in which the Jewish community was located. For the magnate it was just another resource that could be monetized, another source of revenue. Just in the way that a Jew would buy the rights to operate a tavern or a flour mill or, in the case of the story we are about to discuss, to operate fish ponds or salt works, a rabbinic seat often had to be acquired by the rabbi or by his family on his behalf. This in turn forced the rabbi to exact payment for his services, especially from the Jews living in surrounding villages, in order to recoup the steep investment made in purchasing the office. The degree of interference by the local lord or the estate administrator in rabbinic appointments differed from place to place, but never was it wholly absent.<sup>2</sup>

By the eighteenth century, the communal rabbinate in Poland was an institution assailed from many directions. Rabbis, it was often held, were "ignorant, venal, politicized, and dependent on outside power to maintain their authority." Communal leaders, who sought to preserve the viability of their communities in the face of the magnates' demands for ever-increasing revenues, resented the rabbis' interference and competition in their negotiations with the gentile authorities. The scholarly elite found many rabbis ignorant of Bible and Mishnah and the works of the early Talmud commentators (the *Rishonim*); in any given community, they argued, there would likely be numbers of individual scholars who were more accomplished than

**Comment [JS3]:** Once again you have widely inconsistent transliteration of *ṣ* as both K and Q throughout.

**Comment [JS4]:** And also limits on his power.

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the community's rabbi and better able to sort out thorny legal cases. The maskilim found the rabbis' ignorance of proper Hebrew and Polish and general history to be as disturbing as their unfamiliarity with Bible and Mishnah. They advocated rabbis being elected by the whole community rather than its commercial elite, and they wanted their influence restricted to narrow matters of kashrut and other ritual matters. The early leaders of Hasidism found rabbis guilty of aloofness from the needs of the people, both spiritual and social. In their drive to maintain their sinecures rabbis ended up oppressing the people rather than caring for them.<sup>3</sup>

One might conclude from this broad-based critique that the continued existence of the rabbinate was endangered, or deserved to be. But historians have cautioned us not to construct a false sense of crisis out of these criticisms. Similar criticisms had long been lodged against the rabbinate, and the reality is that the position of communal rabbi continued to be a nearly universal feature of Jewish towns and cities. This coexistence of dissatisfaction with the rabbinate and the fact of its persistence helps us to understand the composite and complicated stance of Agnon's narrator in *'Ir umelo'ah* toward the institution. He is deeply conservative and traditional in his desire for allegiance to a rabbi who combines the roles of erudite scholar and communal spiritual leader and who retains his independence in the face of pressures from gentile authorities and from Jewish interests that are not aligned with Torah. He is identified with the Holy Community of Buczacz—even perhaps a projection of it—in longing for the kind of rabbi that Buczacz feels it is entitled to according to its sense of itself and its spiritual aspirations. At the same time, as an honest chronicler with an allegiance to historical actuality, the narrator has a duty to set out the record of Buczacz's foiled, ineffectual efforts to secure the kind of rabbi it desires. The narrator is constrained to present and analyze the forces that conspire to frustrate Buczacz's quest: the city's own inflated sense of its power and importance, the growing wealth of other cities that enabled them to poach the rabbis of Buczacz with impunity, and the baleful interference of the Polish magnates and their agents in internal Jewish communal appointments to maximize their own revenues. It is the interplay between longing and truth telling that informs Agnon's engagements with the rabbinate in *'Ir umelo'ah*.

Aside from the chronicle-like introduction to Book Two, there are three major textual formations that deal with the rabbinate of Buczacz. Two of them are the long stories that comprise Book Two: "Hamevaqshim lahem rav o beruah hamoshel" [In Search of a Rabbi, Or At the Whim of the Ruler, 309-393] and "Hamashal vehanimshal" [The Parable and its Lesson, 394-440]. The third is an assortment of stories in Book Three (441-446, 518-524, 543-557) that report on the tenure of three beloved rabbis who served roughly continuous terms from the end of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth. They are, in order with the books by which they were known, R. Zvi Hirsch Kra, the Net'a Sha'ashu'im, R. Avraham David Warmann, the Da'at Qedoshim, and R. Avraham Te'omim, the Hessed Le'Avraham. These three rabbis boast the further distinction, very important to our patriotic narrator, of faithfulness to Buczacz. Once they assumed their positions as rabbi of the town, they were not lured away or bought off; they served until their deaths.

So, with such a run of good luck, where is the warrant for Buczacz's complaint about its ill-starred efforts to find a rabbi and where is the trenchant critique of the rabbinate? The answer hinges on the question of authority. These three later rabbis served the town after it passed from Polish rule and became incorporated into Galicia, a province of the Austrian Monarchy. One of the hallmarks of this change, which is broadly described by the narrator of the story "Hane'elam" [Disappeared, 448-91], is the diminution of rabbinic authority and the transfer of all but ritual matters from the town's beit din, of which the rabbi served as dean, to the civil courts. The sway

**Comment [JS6]:** But this is NOT the case in Buczacz, at least not as portrayed by Agnon.

**Comment [JS7]:** Was Galicia (at this point) anything more than a geographic location? i.e. you couldn't be incorporated into it. It was a region, not a specific province. (I think.)

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of Torah had been generally constricted. These rabbis may indeed have been exemplars of learning and piety, but because of the altered social and political conditions under which they served, it cannot be said that “reigned” over Buczacz. The events of their rabbinates are conveyed through vignettes and reportage but not through the kind of sustained and organic fictions that were possible when rabbinic authority mattered more. It is not accidental that in the formidable stories in the last third of *‘Ir umelo’ah*, all of which take place during the terms of these rabbis and all of which deal with themes of social oppression, rabbis make virtually no appearance. They have no power to ameliorate the suffering and injustice corrupting the community over which their predecessors once exerted the prerogatives of Jewish law.

When it comes to adducing the paragon of a rabbi, then, it is little wonder that a true example can be found only in an earlier age. Such a figure is Rabbi Moshe in the story “Hamashal yehanimshal,” which, as mentioned above, is one of the two major narratives of Book Two. The time of the action is the generation after the Khmielnitsk massacres and the Tatar and Turkish invasions, a century before Austrian rule and the tenure of the three long-serving rabbis. As seen through the admiring gaze of his assistant, the shamash, Rabbi Moshe is presented as the apotheosis of the rabbi-king. He is the opposite of the aloof scholar who cares only for impressing others with dazzling legal dialectics. He is deeply engaged not only with the material rebuilding of his community after the massacres but also with healing the theological wounds inflicted by the trauma. His empathy is emblemized by his devotion to an orphaned girl who is the only one of his relations to survive. She becomes a fifteen-year-old agunah when she is abandoned by her husband, the rabbi’s most beloved student, whose questioning of God’s justice has dispatched him on a path of self-destruction. It is to save her that the rabbi risks a descent into Gehinnom. As revealed at close quarters by the shamash, Rabbi Moshe is revealed to be holy man of great discipline and integrity. He guards his mouth from speaking guile; he not only knows the Bible intimately but his speech is made up of verses that are quoted with exquisite precision. He is devoted to the studying and reciting of Mishnah as well as the Talmud and its commentators. He uses his sermons not to show off his learning but to respond to the community’s need for consolation and healing.

Most of all, Rabbi Moshe reigns over Buczacz. His reign may be benevolent and wise but his authority is manifest nonetheless. The shamash recalls an incident in which a rich Jewish tax collector was summoned before the rabbinic court because he had slapped and humiliated a poor melamed. When the powerful man refused to appear, the shamash was dispatched to brave brazen servants and angry dogs to deliver his master’s message. “That tax collector paid for his sin in this world on top of what awaits him in the world to come,” the shamash concludes. “No one defies our Master.” (401) This picture of the rabbi’s sway over his community is surely, in part, a projection of his assistant’s adulation of his master; and, moreover, absent from the picture is any pressure from gentile authorities or any resistance from wealthy householders. But the possibility of the existence of this kind of authority, despite the iconographic heightening, is supported by the historical conditions. In the years after 1648, the Polish nobles were busy rebuilding their estates, which had been overrun in the Cossack Rebellion, and they needed the commercial acumen of the Jews to reestablish the urban market economy. Among the Jews as well the process of rebuilding and recovery had not yet produced the extremes of wealth that would encourage commercial elites to challenge rabbinic mandates.<sup>4</sup>

Between the commanding authority of Rabbi Moshe and the belated marginality of the three rabbis, we find the historical world of “Hamevaqshim lahem rav o beruah hamoshel” [In Search of a Rabbi, Or at the Will of the Ruler, 309-393]. The events are set in the second half of

**Comment [JS8]:** Perhaps stipulate that r Moshe is a fully fictional character as opposed to th historical characters above.

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**Comment [JS9]:** SP.

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**Comment [JS10]:** But from w/in the narration of Hamashal, this is already just nostalgia for a distant past, 50 years earlier.

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the eighteenth century both before and after the partition of Poland and the introduction of centralized Austrian administration. The two-part structure of the story's title should be attended to carefully. In the first position is Buczacz's quest for a rabbi, with all it assumes about the very possibility of authoritative rabbinic leadership and the unremitting desire for it. In the second position stands the will or desire of the gentile rulers. Both parts of the title encourage being read in a mildly mocking tone. "Look who is looking for a rabbi!" is one of the ways the first part can be heard, as if to call attention to Buczacz's inflated sense of itself. In the second, the ruler's *ruah*—one of the most plastic words in the Hebrew language—can move anywhere along a gradient from "spirit" to "temperament," as if to underscore utter dependence upon his whim or will. Finally, there is the matter of the "or" that separates the two. The use of "or" after a primary title, as in Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*, is a familiar, if now disused, convention. The question here is whether the "or" implies an equivalence or identity between the two or whether it presents the second as an alternative to the first, and if so, whether, ominously, the first (the Jews of Buczacz) will be appropriated or taken over by the second (the ruler). The reader embarks upon the story with these possibilities in mind and returns later to see which are confirmed. At the very least, the title suggests that the narrative, in its theme and structure, will likely be divided in two, and this turns out to be very much the case.

This narrative lies at the vital, epic center of *'Ir umelo'ah* as a whole. It comes at the midpoint of the book, and, novella-like at nearly ninety pages, it is by far the longest story. It is also the most ambitious, both thematically and compositionally. The first half of the story addresses nothing less than the question of what is the true nature of Torah study and whether the vocation of the sage who engages in such study can any longer be combined with the role of the community rabbi. The second half explores the conflict between two wealthy Jewish arrendators who lease the rights to large-scale projects (fish ponds and salt works) from separate Polish noblemen. The competition between them is brought to a pitch of violent reprisals by the vagaries of nature and by the rival interests of the Gentile lords who back them. Because a conflict of this proportion threatens the Jewish commonweal, the parties are forced—not once but three times—to submit to the arbitration of a *beit din*; but the authority of the rabbinic court is flouted in all instances, the first two times because the businessmen withdraw from the proceedings and the last because a powerful lord overturns a verdict inconvenient to him.<sup>5</sup>

note from Klop  
model

## BUZACZ SEEKS A RABBI

The two parts of "Hamevaqshim lahem rav o beruah hamoshel" are vastly different in their setting and their mode of writing. The first takes place largely within the cramped bedroom/reception room of R. Avraham, the rabbi of Zabno, where he receives the delegation from Buczacz. That same confined space is the site of the nocturnal visits between R. Avraham and R. Mordechai, the Buczacz tinsmith of prodigious Torah learning. The writing in these scenes is itself thick with learning and imitates the intimate back-and-forth, attack and counter-attack, between two scholars who engage in "combat" for the greater glory of Torah. The second half of the story, in contrast, unrolls a vast, epic canvas in which two titans of Jewish commerce negotiate with powerful Polish magnates. Titanic as well are the descriptions of the construction of the earthworks, dams and sluices for the fish ponds that are undertaken on a huge scale in order to withstand—in the end, futilely—the onslaughts of nature. This is not the space of Jewish culture, and representing these Promethean contestations with the elements demands of Agnon a

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focus on the materiality of the world and the invention of a kind of writing in evidence nowhere else in his oeuvre.

Precisely because these two parts are so different, it is natural wonder whether and how the story can cohere and what point Agnon is seeking to make by binding them together. This is the question that will inform our discussion of the story and be answered in due course. Here at the outset, a short answer cannot be given by pointing to the enchainment architecture of the story. Because that structure cannot be understood in the abstract, it is necessary to present an outline of the several sections of “Hamevaqshim lahem rav o beruah hamoshel” and their sequential relationship to one another. In a work of this kind of complexity, moreover, being equipped with a plot summary as a navigational tool is no small advantage.

The story is divided into five sections.<sup>6</sup> Section One (309-31), which lacks a separate title and shares the title of the story as a whole, opens with the journey of Buczacz notables to Zabno to offer the rabbinate of their city to R. Avraham. The office had been vacant for ten years while Buczacz held out for the return of the much respected R. Leibush Auerbach, who had left to become rabbi in Stanislav. Sometime after his death in 1750, a consensus emerges to offer the position to R. Avraham. To the great surprise of the Buczacz delegates, R. Avraham declines and proceeds to tell them that the most suitable candidate for the position is a scholar who already resides in Buczacz, a tinsmith named R. Mordechai, who is all but unknown to city’s religious leadership. R. Avraham accedes to his visitors’ request that he tell them about R. Mordechai, and the preponderance of Section One, which takes place over one night, is R. Avraham’s great monologue, which describes how he met the younger scholar and the intimate, secret bond that developed between them. R. Avraham is consumed with curiosity about R. Mordechai’s obscure origins; but their late-night study sessions are so intense that there is never time for the younger scholar to tell his story.

That story is told in Section Two, titled “R. Mordekhai verabo” [R. Mordechai and His Teacher (331-345)]. R. Mordechai has decided to move to Buczacz, and on the eve of his departure he fulfills a promise he had made to describe his origins. That account is retold by R. Avraham as he continues his all-night monologue before the visitors from Buczacz. As a boy, Mordechai grew up in a village in which his father and mother operate an inn that caters to well-to-do Polish travelers. There are few Jews in the village, and, with only the desultory lessons of an uncouth and irritable melamed, the boy grows up unlettered, to the dismay of his parents. One day when his father is searching for a lost cow, he comes upon a disoriented elderly rabbi who has made a sudden escape from the clutches of a great magnate who seeks to do him ill for reasons that are not made known until much later in the story. Mordechai’s father installs him in a hiding place and assigns his young son to minister to his needs. The boy observes the saintly rabbi, whose name is purposefully withheld by the narrator, and becomes deeply attached to him. As the rabbi emerges from his trauma and becomes more away of the boy’s presence and his native curiosity, he begins to teach him the rudiments of Jewish learning with the help of the sole text available to them, a humash with Rashi’s commentary. Finding the boy quick and eager, the rabbi devotes himself to his education, and within a brief span of time—and with the aid of a Talmud volume secretly conveyed to them—Mordechai emerges as a Torah scholar blessed with a sharp dialectical mind and near-total recollection. In a shift of political winds, the rabbi is rehabilitated and returned to his community.

Section Three, “Mah ra’ah harav shebarah” [What the Rabbi Saw that Made Him Flee (345-362)], begins a narrative that, aside from the hint in the title, has nothing to do with what has come before. The tale concerns a conflict between two wealthy Jewish arrendators with the

**Comment [JS11]:** Inconsistent transliteration of his name throughout.

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generic names Reuven and Shimon. Reuven has leased the fishing rights to a river from a Polish noblewoman; Shimon has leased the rights to manufacture table salt. The trouble begins when Reuven proposes to the noblewoman that he refurbish and operate two large fish ponds in her possession. Shimon vigorously protests because under extreme weather conditions the ponds could overflow and destroy his salt works. Reuven overrides these objections by undertaking a massive engineering scheme that involves driving huge pilings deep into deep into the floor of the ponds and constructing sluices that would control the runoff and prevent flooding. A thousand of the noblewoman's serfs are employed in the construction, and the final product is deemed a wonder of human ingenuity. The abundance of reasonably-priced fish soon produced by the ponds is celebrated by all quarters of the countryside; when the ponds freeze over in the winter, they are the scene of gay skating parties put together by members of the Gentile gentry. During the spring thaw an unexpected emergency arises when giant chunks of ice threaten to destroy the sluices, and an army of serfs is again mobilized to repel the ice flows with pitchforks and ancient weapons from the noblewoman's armory. The threat is averted, but soon thereafter unremitting spring rains begin to pose an even greater risk.

The threatened calamity takes place in Section Four, "Mayim bemayim" [Water within Water, (362-77)]. The volume of rainwater that has seeped into the ground is so enormous that long-sealed springs underneath the ponds are forced open, and when the water from above combines with the water from below, the pilings give way, the sluices blow open, and the ponds flow over into the surrounding countryside. This takes place unbeknownst to Reuven on the Sabbath when he is in synagogue and at home with his family. When he sets out on horseback Sunday morning with his Gentile horse master Habrilo to take stock of the situation, he is horrified to behold a vast flooded plain in which the upper waters and the lower waters have combined to erase all evidence of his grand projects and return the world to a state of near chaos. He is forced to contemplate this scene for a long time because the feet of their suffering animals are stuck in the deep mud that everywhere prevails. When Reuven finally reaches higher ground, he turns to a present business emergency. He had arranged to deliver wagon-loads of fish to an army commander for an important banquet, a commitment he now cannot fulfill from his destroyed ponds. If he does not make the delivery, he will forfeit a valuable jewel placed with the commander as security. Reuven dispatches representatives to purchase fish at a steep price from a competitor and transport them to the army base. In the meantime, Shimon, irate over the inevitable flooding of his salt works, a destruction he had long predicted, takes steps to waylay Reuven's shipment of fish and prevent it from arriving at its destination.

Because of their prominence, the dispute between Reuven and Shimon becomes a cause celebre at the highest reaches of Polish Jewry, with sides taken and opinions vociferously expressed. The dispute also implicates the powerful backers of the two grandees from among the nobility and has powerful implications for the communal institutions supported by their wealth. Great efforts are taken to keep the conflict from reaching the Gentile courts. Other sources of hatred come to the fore; the more learned and pious of the two, Shimon resents Reuven's easy manner with the Gentile lords and the accommodations he makes in his dress and the education of his daughters. Both men doubt that there exist rabbinic judges who can understand the complexity of their commercial dealings. They finally agree to a beit din made up of three members: each disputant chooses a merchant to serve as his advocate and the two choose a rabbi as a third. But when the three sit down together, the rabbi refuses to serve in a court that includes members who are not learned in Jewish law.

**Comment [JS12]:** Cf midrashic descriptions of how Flood of Noah worked. Cited in rashi there.

**Comment [JS13]:** i.e., he is less religious or pious.

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will not allow it to attain? This is another instance of a norm and the deviance from that norm that we saw in play concerning the *hazanim* in the previous chapter and we will find throughout *'Ir umelo'ah*. Therefore the opening pages of the story, before we are swept up into the broad arc of R. Avraham's monologue, are especially valuable for understanding what Buczacz wants but can't have.

At the outset of the story, Buczacz unites around the candidacy of the rabbi of Zabno, R. Moshe Avraham Abush Margolis, the *Tsiluta deAvraham*, who will be called here for convenience sake, as he is the story itself, simply R. Avraham. But what transpires in the brief textual space even before this point of departure is revealing about where Buczacz stands in the world. After the death of R. Auerbach, Buczacz regrets the ten years wasted in waiting for him to return, and the town throws itself into a frenzy of politicking on behalf of numerous candidates. The field is reduced to three and overtures are made, but none makes it to Buczacz. One dies on the way. The second never finds out about the offer because the *parnas* of his community intercepts the letter and hides it from him. The third withdraws after hearing that he has been defamed in the ears of the lord of Buczacz, who threatens to beat him if is installed. Such are the forces that check Buczacz's aspirations. On the one side, there are other more powerful Jewish communities, deserving or not, that want the same thing. Stanislaw had the wealth to lure R. Auerbach, and here another community boasts an aggressive and unscrupulous lay leader who deceives the town's rabbi. On the other side, there is the self-interested interference of the Polish nobility in the internal spiritual affairs of the Jews who live in the towns they own.

These humiliations reveal Buczacz for what it is in the eyes of the world: a third-tier *Ukrainian* town with a precarious political situation. Yet because of a mixture of denial and self-worth, Buczacz does not accept this valuation. Piety and learning, the less-tangible assets left out of the tally, form the basis for the town's *amour-propre*. It is on the strength of these resources that Buczacz believes itself worthy of a worthy rabbi and persists in believing that there exists somewhere an important rabbinic figure who will appreciate those qualities over more worldly advantages. The worthies of Buczacz find in R. Avraham just such a figure, and they see in the qualities *he* embodies the qualities they wish admired in themselves. When it comes to learning, his *hidushim* are said resemble in their depth those of the Maharam Schiff, a renowned German rabbi from the previous century. When it comes to piety, the fact that various kinds of misfortune have not been visited upon the town in which he serves (fire, breakdown of the *'eruv*, the fact that no litigants have refusal to stand trial) is accounted to his righteousness (*tsidqato*). And when it comes to *yihus*, his lineage affiliates him to distinguished rabbis, including R. Auerbach, who was his uncle. In looking for a rabbi after its own image, note that Buczacz is looking not only for a trophy, a brilliant scholar whose reputation, publications and lineage will pay public tribute to the city. It wants piety and holiness as well. The idealization of R. Avraham is poignant not because he falls short of these expectations but because we will soon see him quite otherwise, as he experiences himself, when he begins his monologue.

But before the narrator hands off the story to R. Avraham's monologue, he allows Buczacz to put on its best face. The elders of the city choose three scholars to make the approach to R. Avraham as well as to take his measure. There is the venerable R. Ber, whose sons-in-law populate the rabbinic seats of the region; the acute R. Yeruham, whose teachings have been noted in Levov and Brody; and the encyclopedic R. Levi, who knows the text of the entire Talmud. The three are drawn from the "*harifei ha'ir*," householders who are serious scholars but not professional rabbis even though they have the requisite qualifications. In its

**Comment [JS18]:** Interestingly, this very fully realized character IS an historical figure. Not at all clear where Agnon drew any insight re his personality from though.

**Comment [JS19]:** Is it anachronistic to call it Ukrainian?

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Section Five (377-93) has no title. The previous sections were published in *Haaretz* during Agnon's lifetime; the material in this final section was added from manuscript by Emunah Yaron and contains a number of ellipses. A court of three rabbinic jurists in finally agreed upon. Reuven and Shimon each choose one jurist and the two argue their cases before a distinguished elderly rabbi. He listens in silence to the protracted and complex arguments, and his younger colleagues suspect he is senile. Yet at the end of proceedings he stuns them with his total recall and his rehearsal of the details of the case. He issues a verdict, but the narrator does not reveal it, and the reader never knows whether it was Reuven or Shimon who was vindicated. The loser complains of the injustice of the verdict to the Duke, the Polish nobleman who rules the city in which the elderly rabbi resides. The Duke sends for the rabbi, who, realizing he is in danger, flees. This is precisely "what the rabbi saw that made him flee," and this is how he ended up wandering in a cow field to be found and hidden by R. Mordechai's father and become the teacher of his son. R. Avraham concludes his narrative with a description of the rabbi's rehabilitation. The Duke eventually changes his mind and sends a carriage to bring the rabbi back to his community with great honor. Before he takes leave from R. Mordechai, he studies with him the statement from Pirkei Avot (1:10): "Love work; hate domination [literally, the rabbinate]; and seek not undue intimacy with the government."

Realizing R. Avraham's refusal is final, the members of the Buczacz delegation return home as they recall to each other instances in which they have benefited from R. Mordechai's services as a tinsmith. Once back, they tell their story; the city is abuzz with the anticipation of crowning a new rabbi who, to its glory, surprisingly turns out to be one of its hidden treasures. In the meantime, the Polish ruler of Buczacz has gotten wind of events and pronounces his approval of the appointment. An even more distinguished delegation is put together to make the formal offer to R. Mordechai, which they proceed to do with great ceremony. R. Mordechai has always steered clear of the professional rabbinate in favor of the independence provided by handicraft as a livelihood. Once he is informed that his appointment has found favor in the eyes of the local lord, his disinclination is confirmed. He rejects the offer and makes plans to leave Buczacz as soon as possible. Having failed in its quest, Buczacz remains without a rabbi.

In addition to providing a guide for following a complicated plot, this outline puts in relief two large-scale features of the story. The first is its implied chronology. The narrator takes no care in citing calendar dates or indicating the number of years that elapse between events. In fact, he affects an insouciant disregard for all precise demarcations of time. It is truly astonishing, for example, that R. Mordechai goes from being an unlettered lad to a prodigious scholar during his brief time under the rabbi's tutelage. Anticipating the reader's incredulity, the narrator offers, "I am compelled to say that perhaps I was not exact about the times. I mix early with late, that is to say, I may have joined the texts he studied in the city to those he studied in the village. For the essence of the matter it makes little difference" (380-81). Yet the narrator's indifference to such matters does not still our own desire to locate the disparate pieces of the story along a time line. And this is something we can accomplish by looking at the bigger picture despite being denied explicit markers. We know, for example, that the present of the story takes place not long after the death of R. Leibush Auerbach, which is ten years after he left Buczacz for Stanislaw. The nighttime meetings between R. Avraham and R. Mordechai take place some years earlier before the latter's removal to Buczacz. The events surrounding R. Mordechai's birth obviously transpire a generation earlier. It is at some point in his youth that his life is intersected by the rabbi, who is escaping from the political consequences of his ruling in the conflict between Reuven and Shimon, which had been simmering for some time before the

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disaster. The finality of R. Avraham's refusal to accept the rabbinate of Buczacz returns us to the present, and the story concludes about a month later with R. Mordechai's own refusal.

The fact that the story describes a vast circle that begins and ends at more-or-less the same point underscores how much has changed between departure and return. The representatives of Buczacz set out with great expectations to offer a valuable prize to an estimable scholar only to end up with the coveted office being rejected by a local tinsmith. Even if this real present time is brief (the duration of the journey back and forth to Zabno and the all-night monologue), the span covered in R. Avraham's account is substantial, perhaps two generations. Before it doubles back to the present, the story moves insistently backward in time as if it were presenting the etiology of a disease. The disease is the fatal enfeeblement of the rabbinate as an institution, and the originating cause, Gentile intervention provoked by Jewish mercantile hubris, began long ago.

Not that this nexus is always obvious, even if viewed from a high altitude. This is the second feature made evident by the plot outline: the cleavage between the two halves of the story. From the closeted, private world of elite scholars sparring with one another and a spiritual master training a disciple in secret the story pivots toward the higher reaches of Jewish-Gentile relations in Poland and the human effort to control the primordial forces of nature. "Hamevaqshim lahem rav o beruah hamoshel" tests the elasticity of story as an organic form. Can narrative materials that are so greatly different be made to pull together toward a common purpose? In a certain respect, Agnon's ambitions in attempting to unify his story are no less **Promethean** than Reuven's efforts to bend the natural world to his will. Fortunately, because narrative is not nature, Agnon has a better chance of making good on his wager. But his narrator is hardly unaware of the steepness of the challenge. At the end of the second section of the story ("The Rabbi and His Student"), just as we are about to be ushered into the machinations of Reuven and Shimon, he turns to the reader:

Now we shall relate the reason that compelled the rabbi to flee his city and conceal himself from the Duke and the reason the Duke pursued him. If this account is extensive and diverts us from the subject, know that in the end everything will return to its original place, to the holy community of Buczacz and to R. Mordechai, some of whose merits have already been made known to us. (345)

In the tone of cozy reassurance with which the narrator often turns to his readers, he prepares them for a sustained narrative sojourn that moves into unfamiliar territory far beyond any ostensible relevance to the Buczacz rabbinate and its travails. Is there secret anxiety behind the confident persona? Is the narrator perfectly sanguine that the pieces of the puzzle will come together? It is difficult to say. But for us as readers, the question has been put in play, and our senses have been alerted to the fraught question of narrative coherence.

It is a telling irony that in this, the longest story in *'Ir umelo'ah*, the book Agnon devotes to Buczacz, except for the opening and closing pages, the action takes place outside Buczacz and unconnected to it. This is a story about the town's failure to find a rabbi, and the account of that failure necessarily unfolds elsewhere, in places invested with just the kind of political and financial power that Buczacz lacks in order to achieve its goal. Yet the failed quest and the grand and spectacular events that render its failure inevitable make sense only in relation to the quest itself. **What is the ideal of the rabbi Buczacz searching for such that the forces of reality**

**Comment [JS16]:** You (over)use this word 7 times throughout the essay. I'm not even sure how Reuven's efforts are Promethean here? Isn't this how fish ponds were built? Sure, it's a lot of work, but why Promeathean?

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own eyes, the existence of such a group is one of Buczacz's greatest assets and one that allows the town to believe it can upgrade the desirability of its rabbinic post beyond its modest wealth and size. The composition of the delegation is geared to conveying to the candidate this surplus value. But it is also intended to make sure that a future rabbi of Buczacz in fact *sees* it as a value. For, as we have seen, it is part of the critique of the decline of the rabbinate in Poland that some rabbis, equipped mainly to deal with practical legal matters, feel intimidated by the presence of scholars with deeper theoretical learning in the communities over which they are supposed to rule. Because the embassy to R. Avraham is intended both to impress and probe, the early pages of the story (310-14) have the quality of an exquisitely refined dance; acting within the rarified etiquette and parlance of the scholarly class, the visitors use every opportunity to display their erudition to their host and also to observe how it registers on him.

But when it comes time for the rabbi to take charge of the conversation, he turns matters in a different direction. Although he seems entirely persuaded of high level of Jewish learning in Buczacz, he is less sanguine about the city's political fortunes, about which he shows himself to be remarkably conversant. He knows that the city has a new ruler, and he inquires about his disposition toward the Jews and his susceptibility to bribery. He asks about a wagon-full of Jewish artisans from Buczacz who were kidnapped by a Polish lord and delivered to the ruler of Stanislaw as reparations for a Jew he had murdered. By making these inquiries R. Avraham is not trying to better his advantage or to take Buczacz down a peg. Yet he is implying that it may be better to be a rabbi in a town like Zabno, smaller and less learned than Buczacz, than to officiate in a grander place that is constantly subject to the whims of Gentile rulers. His skepticism on this score, bruited so early in the story, serves to adumbrate what will become its major preoccupation.

When the representatives from Buczacz get down to the business that brought them to Zabno, they present the rabbi with a letter of rabbinical appointment that was carefully formulated by the communal leadership before their departure. This is a formal document, fully consistent with the practice of the times, which lists the duties of the position and its compensation. In giving us a précis of that document, the narrator omits the routine responsibilities (see Chapter Two, p. XX) and focuses on the issues that bear special importance for the community of Buczacz. Rather than being merely a checklist of responsibilities, the letter in fact reflects back upon its framers and opens a precious window onto the holy community of Buczacz and its aspirations. The rabbi of Buczacz, to begin with, should lead the community in peace and equanimity, avoiding intrigues and controversies, even those undertaken "for the sake of Heaven." If a case of an agunah presents itself to the rabbi, he should devote his attention to resolving it even if it comes from far away, and he should not be constrained by legal over-scrupulousness in pursuing a solution. When he delivers his major homilies several times a year, he should take care to include, in addition to the customary learned Talmudic arguments, stories and parables from the aggadah in order attend to the spiritual nourishment of the common people. Coming from outside Buczacz, he should not use his rabbinic authority to supplant or replace the minhagim of the city, especially when it comes to the recitation of the piyyutim that are part of its ancient rite. He should refrain from writing amulets for the ill and restrict himself to praying on their behalf. Finally, when it comes to the fast of the 20<sup>th</sup> of Sivan, the day of remembrance for the victims of 1648, he should be steadfast in preventing erosion of its observance and insist that the fast be kept even by individuals visiting Buczacz from lands that were not affected by the massacres.

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This list of conditions and responsibilities has a wistful and even futile quality in light of the rejection Buczacz will sustain first from R. Avraham and then from R. Mordechai. Yet, in the last analysis, the list tells us more about the values that comprise Buczacz's self-ideal than the nature of a rabbinic leader who upholds them. Buczacz sees itself as—or, more accurately, longs to become—a community that avoids divisiveness, defends the defenseless, cares for the spiritual needs of all its members, insists on the dignity of its traditions, and pays its debt of commemoration to its martyrs. All this is in addition to zeal in areas of worship and learning, which are taken for granted. Together these aspirations describe the true *qehilah qedoshah*, holy community, which is how Buczacz sees its best self. If the city were larger and wealthier and unencumbered by capricious Gentile rulers, it would be in a stronger position to secure a rabbi equal to its aspirations. It is not, alas; yet it persists in its proprietary pride and does not desist from wanting what it wants. This is the source of the story's ironic pathos. Buczacz has chosen to elevate R. Avraham, but he declines and points them to a humble artisan, who should be honored to be so ennobled but also declines.

Although R. Avraham turns down the offer of the delegates from Buczacz, as a compensation he offers them—and us—an extraordinary story in the form of his monologue. The wise men of Buczacz are thrown into a state of skeptical consternation by being told, after the rabbi of Zabno had rejected them, that a common tinsmith living amongst them is worthy to be their rabbi. They naturally press R. Avraham for evidence of R. Mordechai's brilliance, and in deliberating on how to respond to their urgent appeals, R. Avraham makes a crucial decision that resonates throughout the whole world of *'Ir umelo'ah*.

Said R. Yeruham, "Perhaps the rabbi of Zabno would give us an example of R. Mordechai's teaching?" Said R. Ber, "Perhaps he would tell us something of the deeds of R. Mordechai?"

The rabbi began to weigh in his mind which was preferable, a teaching or a story about his life. If a teaching is presented before a *palpelan*, he will continue to play with it and sometimes take it to the ends of the earth. If it is presented before a *baqi*, he will sometimes display so much unnecessary erudition that exceptional wisdom is needed just to return the matter to its original point. Therefore a story (*sipur ma'aseh*) is preferable. Yet when it comes to something R. Mordechai has taken so much trouble to conceal, do I have the right to reveal it? (314)

On the face of things, the rabbi has a simple decision to sort out, which he makes on practical grounds. Although it would be natural to adduce an example of R. Mordechai's scholarly éclat, he is concerned that if he does so its brilliance would be muted and dissipated by his listeners' cleverness. A *palpelan* is a practitioner of dialectical argument, and a *baqi* possesses encyclopedic textual knowledge. Once learned listeners such as these have been given a meaty bone to chew on, there may be nothing left. R. Avraham may not be thinking only generally. His interlocutors, after all, are drawn from the *harifei Buczacz*, the "sharp ones" of the city, whose scholarly acumen has scared off other rabbinical candidates in the past. Having thus eliminated the first option, R. Avraham proceeds to the second and begins to tell the story of R. Mordechai's life.

**Comment [JS23]:** Is there evidence of this in the text?

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Yet what appears to be a practical calculation reveals a profound anxiety underlying it. It is not just R. Avraham who chooses story over Torah in this local instance but also Agnon and his narrator throughout *'Ir umelo'ah*. Given the work's professed intention to foreground worship and study, the reader reasonably expects to come across references to learned discussions, contested hidushim, case rulings, and homiletical discourses. But in fact relatively few of these are in evidence. Agnon systematically decides in favor of recounting the lives of scholars over representing the substance of their scholarship. The rationale for the decision is a question we shall put aside for the moment. It is enough to say that, facing his audience, Agnon's reasons are likely to be very different from those of R. Avraham facing the *harifei Buczacz*. Yet the need to justify is the same. For although the tradition gives primacy to Torah, the writer has chosen to subordinate it to story, and the arrogation at the center of that choice, however inevitable, leaves unease in its wake. Within the traditional world of the narrator—as opposed to Agnon's—there is a need to reiterate the justification in various formulations.

The issue recurs in variations twice in this, the first section of the story. After the intensity of their frequent nighttime study sessions, R. Mordechai announces to R. Avraham that he is moving with his family to Buczacz, and the question then arises of how the two will take leave from each other. The Talmud instructs two parting scholars to exchange a *devar halakhah*, a legal teaching. Another tradition enjoins the departing person to ensure that his debts have been paid, and R. Mordechai has repeatedly deferred fulfilling the promise he made to relate the story of how he acquired his prodigious knowledge. Here again the dilemma presents itself as a choice between teaching and story, and, again, a rationale is produced to authorize the recourse to latter (327-28). Immediately following that passage, R. Avraham interrupts his monologue as dawn is breaking and observes that a whole night has passed without words of Torah learning having been exchanged. R. Ber hastens to put his mind at ease with an anecdote about how his rabbinical sons-in-law once spent a whole evening discussing the ordeals brought on the Jews by Hmielnitski, Shabtai Zvi and Jacob Frank without exchanging words of Torah. They did so without compunction based on the principle that *ma'aseihem shel yisrael torah*, the act of recounting the tribulations of Israel is itself Torah, a position buttressed by a subtle exegesis of Number 21:14 ("The Book of the Wars of the Lord") offered by his colleague R. Yeruham (329). In staging these various rationales, is not Agnon in the end conveying to us something fundamental about his own master choice to represent the lost world of Buczacz through story rather than teaching?

Even if the decision is taken for granted, it is not without untoward consequences. R. Avraham's decision to relate the life of R. Mordechai rather than his scholarship is made without its subject's consent. That the modest tinsmith from Buczacz is a scholar of phenomenal genius is a fact that has been hidden from public knowledge, and that concealment has been the product of R. Mordechai's own desire and the oath exacted from R. Avraham to honor his wish. In acceding to the request of the Buczacz visitors, R. Avraham is supremely aware of the fatefulness of his choice. He announces to his guests: "I am about to reveal to you matters that I have concealed until now. This is what the rabbis meant when they said, 'There is no man who does not have his hour, and there is no man who does not have his place.' R. Mordechai's hour has arrived, and I shall tell of it" (314). With these words, R. Avraham launches into the great monologue that will tell R. Mordechai's story and in so doing violate the promise made to guard his secrets. The passage from Pirquei Avot (4:3) adduced to mitigate the willfulness of this unsanctioned choice is malleable and enigmatic. Even if the statement means that each person

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Comment [JS24]: Seems clearly an artistic-storytelling decision.

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has his appointed hour to shine, how is it that R. Avraham arrogates to himself the decision about when the hour of another man has arrived?

Ironically, this fateful decision ends up cutting in a different direction. R. Mordechai's life is indeed exposed against his will, but in the substance of what is revealed thereby there is nothing to cause anything but admiration. It is the story of a prodigy who came late to the study of Torah, mastered its monumental complexity and then remained true to his teacher's counsel to avoid public office and live by his own handiwork. It is a principled and steady life whose only drama lies in its willed concealment. The great monologue, to be sure, does bring hidden things to light and provides a sensational expose of a sort; but the subject who is truly exposed is not R. Mordechai. In the progress of the telling, R. Avraham unwittingly reveals his own soul, which turns out to be far more vulnerable and unaware of itself than that of his younger colleague. His inadvertent confession is a great gift because it gives us the opportunity to look into the inner life of an eighteenth-century Torah scholar. This is the kind of access that only Agnon's imaginative technique can grant us. R. Avraham's monologue becomes a confirmation of Agnon's foundational intuition that it is story rather than teaching that provides truth.

The monologue is a solution to a problem inherent in the conception of the Buczacz stories. For this project Agnon fashioned a special narrator (described in Chapter Three) who is impersonal, pious, ironic, garrulous and all-knowing. Yet although the narrator can see into his characters' hearts and channel their thoughts, his voice remains distinctive, even if it is capable of different inflections. The creation of the narrator and his voice is a great achievement that serves Agnon well in multifarious ways throughout *'Ir umelo'ah*. But there are limitations. Except for dialogue and the representation of inner thoughts, the only way we can hear the sustained voice of the characters who populate the stories is for the narrator temporarily to relinquish his monopoly and hand over the baton to one of them.<sup>7</sup> This is precisely what happens at three critical junctures in the volume in which the poetics of the monologue is leveraged to create extraordinarily vivid figures who are embodied in their voices. Gavriel, the son, recounts the martyrdom of his grandfather in "Ha'ish levush habadim" [The Linen Man]; R. Avraham describes his relationship with the mysterious R. Mordechai in the story before us now; and the shamash in "Hamashal vehanimshal" [The Parable and its Lesson] recalls the journey to Gehinnom taken a half-century earlier. Each of these guest narrators differs from the master narrator in his own way. But they are joined in one thing: Unlike the narrator, none is a storyteller, and the story they tell is the great moment in their lives, a one-time event that has been provoked by a crisis. Each is importuned by an inquisitive audience, but, rather than resisting, each takes the encounter as a providential opportunity to disburden himself of a story that has been repressed at some emotional cost. Although the monologist is telling a story about another (R. Gavriel, the Linen Man or R. Mordechai or R. Moshe and his journey to the Netherworld), the true revelation is reflexive. The teller exposes himself in the telling, and because the disclosures are inadvertent they often found not in the main narrative but in digressions, repetitions, and obiter dicta.

## SCHOLARSHIP AS CONTEST AND ROMANCE

R. Avraham is gifted monologist precisely because of his stupidity, faithfulness and lack of self-awareness. Despite the fact he is an astute and seasoned Talmudist, he is stupid in the sense that

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ry internet files\content.ie5\61hmt2sm\mintz - rabbis and  
scholars (ch 5).docx

**Comment [JS26]:** Alan – I completely disagree with this rating of R Avraham. I do not see him as "stupid" (although clearly R Mordechai is the greater chacham). Why do you think him faithless? I don't see this at all.

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he is insensible to how he is perceived by others, and he is unresponsive to humiliation. He is a well-regarded communal rabbi and a scholar of wide repute with a sense of his own worth; yet when his authority is assailed and his scholarship questioned, he has no difficulty stepping aside in favor of a deeper understanding of Torah presented by others, even if it is at his expense. When he becomes passionately dependent upon his late-night meetings with R. Mordechai and their scholarly exchanges, he possesses scarcely any awareness of the obsessive nature of the relationship he has entered into. Taken together, these qualities make him a poor judge but an honest reporter of his experience. He lacks the guile and self-interest to skew and manipulate, and that reason he becomes that rare thing in modern fiction: a reliable narrator. His faithfulness to the study of Torah trumps his need for recognition. But his ability to put himself aside does not mean that he is without needs. When he becomes emotionally enmeshed in his relationship with R. Mordichai, he is wonderfully capable of describing all the symptoms of his condition without the least consciousness of their meaning.

The opening scene of his monologue, in which he is publically humbled and first meets R. Mordichai, is funny in the way only Agnon can be. The scene takes place at a circumcision feast in a village outside of Zabno. Although R. Avraham makes a point of not participating in such pastoral events and not eating or drinking outside his own home, he has made an exception because of a special fondness for the parents of the newborn child. In the learned discourse he gives to embellish the occasion, he offers what he considers a “great hidush” on the question of circumcision before the Giving of the Torah, and then in order to save the Ari (R. Isaac Luria) from suspicion of contradicting the Talmud, he goes on to present a “huge pilpul” that, in passing, resolves difficulties experienced by the scholarly world in parsing a passage in tractate Zevehim. As he is delivering what he considers a virtuoso performance, he notices seated at the table a man in his thirties with quick and acute eyes who is wearing strange garb and a ridiculous-looking hat. As the rabbi makes his points, the man makes dismissive gestures with his shoulders. This only provokes R. Avraham to pull out all the stops. “What did I do? I took up a matter that I had presented to great scholars, who thought that it was as profound as the hidushim of the Maharam Shiff” (315). But even to this *piece de resistance*, the response of the man in the funny hat is a contemptuous hand gesture.

The reader may remember from the first page of the story that it was this reputation for brilliance on the order of the Maharam Shiff that made R. Avraham so attractive to Buczacz in the first place. Who is this figure? Maharam Shiff is a title of honor for Meir ben Jacob Hakohen Shiff, a German rabbi and Talmud scholar who died in 1644 at the age of 36. He composed comments and commentaries on all the tractates of the Talmud, although only a small portion of them survived and were published. In a terse and often obscure style, Shiff engaged his subjects directly without the digressive recourse to remote textual locations that characterized much Talmud scholarship. His penetrating analyses displayed impatience with the positions of some of the greatest of the early authorities.

The association between R. Avraham and the Maharam Shiff turns out to be the farthest thing from a mere conceit. When the festive meal is over, R. Avraham approaches the stranger and asks what in his discourse caused him dissatisfaction. The stranger replies:

“You are the one about whom the world says that his hidushim are as deep as those of the Maharam Shiff. Neither you nor your ilk who make themselves out to understand the Maharm Shiff know what they are talking about.” I said to him, “Does the master have in mind a particular hidush?” He waved his hand

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and said, "What do I need one hidush for when they are all the same? 'The dream of Pharaoh is one and the same.'" (315)

A more summary and derisive dismissal is hard to imagine. Yet rather than defending his honor or registering signs devastation, R. Avraham considers responding with a clever hidush he has stored in his repertoire on these exact words of Joseph in Genesis 41:25 concerning Pharaoh's dream. In the meantime, the stranger has undertaken a systematic critique not only of the arguments R. Avraham had made in his discourse but of "all the hidushim that are said in my name in batei midrash and the yeshivot." The critique rolls on to lay waste to many of the insights of such towering figures as Yosef Karo, Moshe Isserles and Shlomo Luria. Yet, again, rather than taking personal umbrage or expressing pain or injury, R. Avraham says of himself, "I stood like someone who is stunned and I shook my head at myself for having caused the words of our great sages, those from whose mouths we live, to become vulnerable to refutation" (316). R. Avraham comes across as a holy fool who is entirely insensible to his own humiliation and cares only for the honor of Torah.

It is at this moment that R. Mordechai intervenes to defend the honor of the Rabbi of Zabno. But rather than being relieved, R. Avraham is shaken by two disorienting revelations. The first is that the wagon driver dressed in workman's cloths, which is how the as-yet-unknown R. Mordechai appears to him, is capable of engaging in the kind of learned discourse that is the preserve of the highest levels of the scholarly elite. The second revelation, which is told to him by the wagon driver, concerns the identity of the stranger with the ridiculous hat. He is none other than the Maharam Shiff himself, who, according to R. Avraham's quick calculation, died one hundred and twenty years earlier. The strange dress and hat are the costume German Jews were forced to wear, which is confirmed by the fact that a rabbi dressed in this fashion had once visited him in a dream to explain a perplexing passage.

Because of what happens next there is no time to absorb the meaning of these revelations or to make sense of why a great sage has bestirred himself from the Heavenly Academy in order to sully R. Avraham's reputation. Still anonymous and incognito, R. Mordechai takes leave to defend R. Avraham before the Maharam Shiff. Displaying prodigious erudition and acuity, he undertakes a point-by-point refutation that attempts to buttress the hidushim of R. Avraham and restore the foundational authority of the great scholars whose views had been undermined. The Maharam Shiff fires back with a rebuttal that disproves each of the counter arguments. And when R. Mordichai is about to make a comeback, the Maharam Shiff effectively tells him not to bother because he has already anticipated and negated all arguments he could possibly mount. Seeing no way out, R. Mordechai shifts the focus to a different topic, and the two continue to contend, with the advantage moving back and forth between them.

The scene is intensely cinematic and resembles nothing so much as a duel between Samurai swordsmen. A lowly and nondescript commoner suddenly springs into action and takes on a grand master—a visitor from the Other World, no less--and, through a sustained series of dexterous moves, miraculously holds him at bay, all the while defending the honor of a well-meaning but limited bystander. The contest between the Maharam Shiff and R. Mordechai is a dramatic enactment of the concept of *milhemtah shel torah*, the combat of Torah, the idea that the truth of the halakhah can be arrived at *only* through a contentious encounter between two antagonists who give no quarter and vigorously test each other's arguments.<sup>[5]</sup> The more trenchant and searching the attack—and the counter-attack--the more likely it is to expose conceptual and logical flaws that need to be rethought or shored up in order to secure the edifice

**Comment [JS27]:** Confusing bec reader has no idea at this point that this man IS Maharam Schiff.

**Comment [JS28]:** Again...

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of Torah. Although this contestation is fiercely adversarial, it remains impersonal because, ideally, it is entered into on behalf of the honor and integrity of the Torah and not on behalf of individual distinction or repute or ad hominem animosity. Scholars who hold one another in affection and respect assume the role of antagonists for the purpose of this necessary combat and revert to collaborative contact once the goal has been achieved.

This is the exemplary model that describes the ongoing relationship between R. Avraham and R. Mordechai after they encounter one another at the circumcision feast. Less exemplary, ironically, is the behavior of the magisterial scholar from the previous century. The Maharam Shiff is moved to descend from heaven for more proprietary reasons. Having heard tell of a scholar whose *hidushim* are said to be as profound as his own, he undertakes a visitation upon earth in order to protect his reputation and safeguard his legacy. His affect is embittered and rancorous, and it is only once R. Mordechai invites him to present teachings of his that were not preserved in writing that we come to understand the pathos of his life and the reasons for his defensive bitterness. Before his early death, he gave his unpublished writings to his daughter to keep in a locked strongbox for his descendants to release to the world. But the box was broken into, many of his *hidushim* were published unscrupulously by others under their names, and the box itself was destroyed in the great conflagration in the city of Frankfurt. The theft and the fire have been kept from him by Heaven so that he should not be anguished. Yet even without knowledge of these calamities, the fact remains that the majority of his life's work remains unknown, and the soul of this great scholar remains unquiet and unreconciled.

Where is R. Avraham while the duel rages? He has been pushed to the sidelines like a damsel whose honor is being fought over by others. Which emotions seize him? He is stunned, to be sure; but his emotional state is the opposite of that of the dour and bellicose Maharam Shiff. Oblivious to the fact that his own reputation in the academies and study houses is hanging in the balance, R. Avraham is so enthralled by the high-level scholarly thrust and parry unfolding before his eyes that he says, "my soul was about to depart from an abundance of bliss [*metiquit*]" (317). If it were not for the howling of the just-circumcised baby precisely at that moment, he claims he would have died of ecstasy and gone to the place from which the Maharam Shiff had just descended. When the arrival of the time for the afternoon prayer brings an end to the battle of wits, the attention of the company is drawn to a new issue. Given the fact that the Maharam Shiff is a *shade*—he will have returned to the Heavenly Academy by first light the next morning—the question is asked whether he should be separated from others by a partition, a *mehitsah*, during prayer in the way that would be done in the presence of a dead body? On this nice halakhic question R. Avraham happens to have a "huge pilpul" to offer, and he appears poised to present it, remaining, as he does, supremely unaware of the recent blow to the value of his "intellectual property" in the marketplace of learning. But he refrains from doing so in order to keep this golden insight on hand "to recite before the saints in Gan Eden" when his time comes. If the baby had not bawled and if he had blissfully departed the world, he would have had a chance to use his clever pilpul much sooner than he imagined. And surely he would have arrived in Paradise with his naïve pride in his own *hidushim* wholly unaffected by anything that has just happened.

R. Avraham's amalgam of insensibility and innocence stands him in good stead once the Maharam Shiff has departed. R. Mordechai and the Maharam Shiff were locked in combat during the great sage's visitation, and with his departure the two mortals, men who had never met before, are thrown together and left to make sense of this extraordinary occurrence. And the occurrence is extraordinary. The world of this story, as that of all of all the stories in *'Ir*

**Comment [JS30]:** Why interpret it through prism of ego instead of "fighting for אמתה של תורה"?

**Comment [JS31]:** Too demonic.

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*umelo'ah*, is not a universe of magic realism in which occasional violations of natural law are taken for granted. Both R. Avraham and R. Mordechai are supremely aware that a miracle has transpired of which they are the stunned beneficiaries. What they do in the aftermath of this marvelous and uncanny experience is the test of their mettle. Their immediate reaction is to sit down and reconstruct for themselves the critiques the sage had lodged against the current scholarly consensus, of which R. Avraham's work is an integral part, as well as the unpublished *hidushim* the master had vouchsafed to them. Their response helps to explain the motives for the Maharam Shiff's visitation. It is not thinkable that such an eminent master would cross the border between this world and the next to satisfy a personal grievance, like some Homeric god swooping down to meddle in human affairs. His intervention, it is implied, is provoked by a crisis in the world of Torah learning that has disturbed both the upper and lower levels of the cosmos. The Torah has been put out of alignment and its study corrupted. Is this the result of overly-ingenious, performance-oriented culture of learning that deflects from the true, plain meaning of the text? Readers familiar with the Maharam Shiff's writings might be given to infer this critique, although the substance of the crisis remains unelaborated. The all-too-easily-admired teachings of R. Avraham, whose reputation has been enhanced by the association of his work with the genius of the Maharam Shiff, are implicated in the crisis, but they are only a symptom of the problem. For the insensible R. Avraham, the cost to his reputation is nothing compared to the chance to participate in the process of putting the world of Torah back to rights.

What begins as an extraordinary one-time event becomes the foundation for an ongoing study partnership. R. Mordechai has been contracted by the lord of Zabno to fabricate metal lanterns for the lavish wedding of his daughter, and his sojourn in the area affords him the chance to make late-night visits to the rabbi. What takes place during these irregular study sessions constitutes a model for the norm of Torah study that Agnon makes into one of the pillars of his reimagining of Polish Jewry, and it is therefore important to attend to what these two scholars do when they meet. The first passage describes their response to the Maharam Shiff's attack the next morning, and the second describes the nature of their intellectual work during the later nocturnal visits.

We began to reconstruct some of the *hidushim* we heard from the Maharam Shiff. We were astonished to find that each subject, which contained within it multiple subjects, resolved many of the issues that the world finds difficult and at the same time invalidated the explanations that the world has accommodated itself to. In the process, cruxes and contradictions were shown to exist in places where we had thought there were none. (318)

We sat as one in the midst of wondrous *hidushim* and magnificent *pipulim*. He would offer a *hidush* and I would offer a *hidush*, and each *hidush* would be examined seven times over to determine if it could stand before the criterion of truth. For it often happens that people build one *hidush* upon another, sometimes up to eight or nine at a time; but once you realize that the first one is flawed then all the others built upon it have nothing to support them. Worse than that is when people, because of their zeal for *hidushim*, sometimes become mired in error, God forbid, and end up inventing a new law that is refuted by an explicit *gemara*. (320)



The activity R. Avraham and R. Mordechai are embarked upon, which on the surface of things may seem to be narrowly/merely scholastic, in fact bears ultimate, even cosmic significance. But the gravity of their exchanges cannot be appreciated unless several assumptions are understood. The world of Torah learning in which they are operating, to begin with, is dynamic and ahistorical. To be sure, they view themselves as coming at the end of a chain of tradition that began with Scripture and the Mishnah and the Gemara and then proceeded through the Geonim to the early medieval commentators (the Rishonim) to the later commentators (the Aharonim), of which they form the latest link. Yet the very belatedness of their position imposes a formidable burden: it is up to them to maintain the integrity of the entire edifice of the Tradition. That integrity is achieved by maintaining the logical coherence of the received body of Jewish law through a constant process of systematizing and rationalizing the vast profusion of opinions and dicta. The whole system is in constant organic movement as new rulings are added and revisionary conceptualizations of past opinion proposed. Error enters the system when interpreters ignore the plain meaning of the text and build dazzling structures of casuistry to draw attention to themselves. The world of Torah has apparently been recently plunged into just such a downward spiral of inner corruption, and to pull it up short was the aim of the Maharam Shiff's earthly intervention.

It is now left to our two lonely men of faith to continue the work of correction. Here is where the cosmic dimension enters the picture. They are not merely two study partners who, like chess masters, enjoy each other's acuity and take pleasure in testing each other's ideas. A better—but admittedly partial—analogy would be to theoretical physicists, whose contending notions of the fundamental building blocks of the universe have enormous real-world consequences. R. Avraham and R. Mordechai apply themselves to reviewing the corpora of learned argument extant in their time and to submitting them to a rigorous standard of coherence and common sense. What is at stake is not just the theoretical integrity of the Tradition but the very norms of what is permitted and what is prohibited in the daily lives of all Jews. The fact they work in secrecy and anonymity is no bar to the cosmic efficacy of their work; the truth of Torah has in fact been diminished by the avidity of scholars who cannot help printing and disseminating their *hidushim*. A key to R. Mordechai's capacity for incisive focus is his refusal to reveal himself as a talmid *hakham*. But at metaphysical and mystical level, the work of R. Avraham and R. Mordechai is helping to restore the world even if it is not published to the world.

A fundamental prerequisite for the success of their labor is that it be undertaken together. Without the complimentary resources of the other, each scholar working on his own is preordained to fall short and drift into error. The necessary model for working in tandem is, as we have seen, *milhemta shel torah*, the combat of Torah.<sup>8</sup> But the rules of engagement require neither the flashing swords nor the resentful antagonism displayed in the encounter between R. Mordechai and the Maharam Shiff. When R. Avraham and R. Mordechai begin their working sessions, their exchanges are less fraught and more collaborative; yet the necessary competitiveness is not lacking. Their meetings usually begin with R. Mordechai's presentation of a *hidush* that he has formulated since their last encounter. From this local insight he proceeds to clarify larger principles and correct the misinterpretations of earlier authorities. He would keep at this process of widening and deepening the import of his idea "until my eyes shone and I beheld the words of the Torah, both written down and transmitted orally, fitted together and rectified in their purity as on the day they were given by the Almighty and parsed by our ancient

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sages" (321). Yet R. Mordechai's brilliance cannot remain effectual if it is left only to be admired rather than scrutinized. This is where R. Avraham enters the picture.

I also contested [*pilpalti*] with him, and if I won he admitted without shame that the truth was on my side. But in the process of acknowledging this, he would begin to adduce proofs that contradicted my position and began to shore up his own. And if he was forced to leave the matter in the category of "needs further scrutiny," he would say to me, "I rely on the Rabbi of Zabno to discover in the course of his studies that my position is not foolish." (321)

R. Mordechai's indefatigable assertiveness is a quality essential to his achievements as scholar. Yet his brilliance and originality cannot reach their potential if they are not exposed to the astringent corrective of another strong mind, even if it is less brilliant and original. Competitiveness and amour proper guarantee the integrity of the search for religious truth.

The give-and-take of two students or scholars over the Talmudic text is of course familiar to us as the practice of *hevruta*, the Aramaic term for friendship or association. The intellectual potential unleashed by this kind of connection is **anatomized** in the depiction of the study partnership between R. Avraham and R. Mordechai. But it is in probing the affective dimension of the relationship that Agnon shows us something new. The hallmark of this new dimension is secrecy. As a condition for their studying together R. Mordechai requires a solemn oath that his presence and identity will be divulged to no one. (This, of course, is precisely the oath R. Avraham is flagrantly violating by narrating his monologue to the delegation from Buczacz.) His visits are timed to avoid the risk of exposure. He arrives after midnight when the rabbi has already slept several hours and risen to the recite the midnight vigil (*tiqun hatsot*) and the streets of the town are deserted; and he stealthily disappears when the first footfalls are heard of the shamash who knocks on windows to wake worshipers for the first prayers. Even the members of the rabbi's household have no clue as to the identity of the mysterious visitor.

**Comment [JS32]:** anatomized menas dissected. is that what you meant here, or did you mean "embodied"?

R. Avraham's experience of the relationship is deeply split. On the occasions when R. Mordechai materializes and the two launch into their work of presenting and examining *hidushim*, R. Avraham enters a blissful state in which he is wholly absorbed in Torah study. With first light, R. Mordechai transmogrifies from the radiance of a sage to the workaday demeanor of an artisan and departs. Rabbi of Zabno is then cast into a state in which he is painfully aware of R. Mordechai's absence and longs for his return. He is also thrown back upon the obsessive curiosity about R. Mordechai's origins that assailed him when they first met at the circumcision feast. Questions of who were his parents and who were his teachers preoccupy R. Avraham until the moment of their next nocturnal meeting. But these questions are wholly forgotten the moment the door opens and R. Mordechai begins to present his latest *hidushim*, and they swarm back only at the moment the steps of the shamash are heard and R. Mordechai issues his ritual apology for not making good on his promise to tell his story and promptly disappears.

Because R. Mordechai's visits are irregular and brief, R. Avraham finds himself at all other times in a state of forlorn anticipation.

Because of my love of R. Mordechai, my soul became attached to his soul. He was the object of my thoughts all day long until I could acquit myself of the regular lessons I offered and turn toward the *sugeyot* we had dealt with at night. Every night after *tiqun hatsot* I would listen intently for the sound of his

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footsteps. He had not yet told me where he came from or who were his forebears or who was his teacher. This was the case until things fell out such that he told me. And once he told me, he never came again. (322)

We must account ourselves grateful to R. Avraham for his unselfconscious sincerity in naming his situation with the opening allusion to Jonathan's feelings for David in Second Samuel ("My soul was attached to his soul"). This is a relationship for which today we would use the term homosocial, a bond based on feelings of passionate friendship between two men but without sex. As in the case of Jonathan and David, the feelings are not symmetrical. Although there is no confessional vehicle for R. Mordechai to reveal his emotions the way R. Avraham has done, there is abundant evidence that for him the relationship is more instrumental than emotional. It is R. Avraham who is lovesick. He has lost interest in his regular duties; he comes fully alive only in R. Mordechai's presence, and when he is not there, which is most of the time, he suspended in distracted and anxious anticipation, made more acute by the irregularity of the visits and by his own inability to initiate contact. He must wait until R. Mordechai comes to him. And the time spent waiting is consumed with his obsessive curiosity about the secrets of his life that have been withheld from him.

Through his naïve narrator, Agnon uses the motif of secrecy to turn R. Avraham's life into a kind of grotesque bedroom farce. At the same time as he longs to know the true facts of R. Mordechai's early life and scholarly formation, Zabno is abuzz with speculation about the identity of the mysterious stranger, whose visits cannot long be concealed in the small town. The members of the rabbi's own household, who have heard visitor's movements but not seen his face, presume the secrecy prevails because the rabbi is giving spiritual guidance to a wealthy sinner or counseling a Polish lord concerning conversion. The good Jews of Zabno, ever eager to aggrandize themselves through the magnification of their rabbi, make the automatic assumption that because of his greatness R. Avraham has merited private study sessions with no less than the prophet Elijah himself. (The facile recourse to the supernatural hits close to home because this is exactly the presumption that R. Avraham made at his first encounter with R. Mordechai to explain his phenomenal erudition [318].) Having heard the rumor, R. Avraham is now obliged to gather the town elders and demonstrate to them, citing chapter and verse from holy books, exactly how the press of exhausting responsibilities (attending circumcisions, writing indulgences for faithful keepers of the Sabbath, and so on) could not possibly leave Elijah with even a moment of disposable time. Cowed by the rabbi's learning, the elders insist that if it is not Elijah who visits it must be the Holy Ari, the great kabbalist who lived in Safed in the Holy Land in the sixteenth century. Now R. Avraham has to explain to them that it is well established that tsadikim from the Holy Land cannot survive in the air of the diaspora; but then his well wishers ask why such a great soul could not wrap himself in a cloak of holy air in order to travel abroad. The more the rabbi denies these absurdities, the more his followers are strengthened in their belief that it is only modesty that motivates his denials and the more they relish the confirmation that his humility is as great as his learning. This adulation makes him miserable because the inflation of his reputation is the exact inverse of how he feels about himself. For despite the exhilaration of his study hours with R. Mordechai, he has been humbled by a nimbler and more original mind. The disproportion between what he knows he is and the grandiose claims of the townspeople is so painfully shameful to him that he begs R. Mordechai to take his place as the community rabbi; he will vacate his position and become a dayan serving under the younger but greater scholar. R. Mordechai declines the offer with the oft-repeated

**Comment [JS33]:** What do you need all this for? Why not just say it's a description of a profound intellectual bond between two men through the medium of mutual Torah study?

Altogether, why not marshal the many Talmudic sources about Havruta study that express all of these ideas? Both the battle and the eros? "Like two knives sharpening themselves against each other"? etc

**Comment [JS34]:** This is NOT a bedroom farce. No one ends up in another man's wife's bed by accident.

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explanation that he already has a livelihood, thanks be to God; and R. Avraham is constrained to continue keeping his secret and, as a consequence, making his own life a living lie.

The rabbi's situation goes from bad to worse. He becomes embroiled in a tangled legal case concerning a derelict husband who has abandoned two women—one of them the young daughter of his own shamash. The man is being held by a rabbinic court in a distant city, where the older of the two women has confronted him, and the rabbi has to decide whether to request his removal to Zabno. If he remains in the charge of the rabbinic court, he will probably slip off and never be heard from; and if he is consigned to the gentile authorities for transport, he will probably be beaten to death. R. Avraham reassigns all his routine tasks to others and devotes himself to wrestling with these fraught legal issues. In Agnon's world in general and in the view of Buczacz in particular, as made explicit in the letter of rabbinic appointment, the rabbi displays his worthiness and integrity by his willingness to devote himself to the freeing of agunot. Yet despite his full attention and the mobilization of his formidable powers, he gets nowhere, and at the end of each day's exhausting research he hits the same unyielding wall. He is terrified by the prospect that the capacity to originate hidushim has been taken from him. He tries setting aside his investigations into the case of the two agunot and returning to his regular studies; he has found that an insight from a remote context will often jog loose the solution to an impacted problem. But this time the opposite happens. The sugeyot that were clear to him when he originally studied them are now opaque. He enters a downward spiral in which "... the letters began to fly away and my eyes felt like they were sunk in sand" (326-27).<sup>9</sup>

The crisis comes to a head in a surprising betrayal. After a prolonged absence, R. Mordechai materializes one midnight and announces that he is leaving the locality and moving his family to Buczacz. Because this will be their last meeting and time is in short supply, they are faced the question, discussed above, of which of two imperatives has priority: taking leave of each other by deliberating a matter of halakhah or paying the debt owed by R. Mordechai to tell the story of his origins. While R. Mordechai is undertaking a dexterous pilpul on the dilemma, his companion has a singular experience. Two halakhot appear before R. Avraham and ask pleadingly, "When you sat struggling to determine the law in our cases, you used to say that if only R. Mordechai were here you would present us to him. Now that R. Mordechai is standing before you are you not going to mention us to him?" (328). The two halakhot are the case of the agunot that he had taken on an emergency basis and the issue about ritual slaughter discussed in the tractate he had been reading as part of his regular daily studies. There is an endearing touch of magic realism in the way in which the rabbi's guilty conscience animates these neglected claimants.

But the night is moving on, and the Rabbi of Zabno knows full well that the time will suffice for accomplishing only one task, and he makes his choice. He had intended to enlist R. Mordechai help in finding a way to liberate the agunot,

but now my mind is addled and my spirit exhausted and I lack the strength to outline the issues, not to mention entering into a serious give-and-take about them. All I ask is some words to restore my soul. Let the master tell me where he came from and who were his ancestors and with whom he learned Torah. (328)

R. Mordechai accedes to his wish, and we get our story. R. Avraham's decision is not meant to be taken as his yielding to vulgar curiosity. Yet the fact remains that the rabbi does indeed sacrifice the interests of the abandoned women in order to hear R. Mordechai's narrative. What

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is his true motivation? We are already accustomed to the fact that his innocence makes him a reliable reporter of his symptoms (the addled brain and exhausted spirit), but when it comes to their origins he remains clueless. His desperation is of course rooted in the feelings that have been churned up by the affective dimension of his study partnership with R. Mordechai. The bragging of his congregants and the insoluble challenge of the agunah issues have born down on him, and he has undergone what would be called in another age a nervous breakdown. But these are only exacerbating factors. The cause lies elsewhere. R. Avraham has come to realize how much it means to him to share the passionate life of learning with another man and how much he has missed in the past by walking this path alone. The overwhelming desire to be told R. Mordechai's story comes from a thirst to know everything there is to know about a man who has become so central to his life. This desire, which was present from their first meeting, was repeatedly deferred so long as the two were vitally immersed in their scholarly exchanges. But now at their final meeting the possibility for deferral has run out, and his need for connection to this holy man trumps an ethical commitment to the law and to the fate of the hapless victims of another, evil man.

There are three thematic threads that are woven together in the conclusion to "Hamevakshim lahem rav o beruah hamoshel," the story that forms the first unit of the larger novella of that title. The first is the choice for story over law. The issue first arose when R. Avraham, pushed by the visitors from Buczacz to tell them something of R. Mordechai's greatness, deliberates in his mind whether to satisfy their request with an example of his teaching (*devar shemu'ah*) or with a story (*sipur ma'aseh*). The second in order is the one just discussed, in which R. Avraham gives up the chance to enlist R. Mordechai's help in resolving the knotty challenge of the agunot in favor of hearing the story of his origins. The third occurs immediately following when the monologue is interrupted by the approach of morning and the shamash's call to prayer. When R. Avraham observes that a whole night has passed without words of Torah, he is assured by the visitors that discussing the affairs of the Jewish people is tantamount to engaging in Torah study (*ma'aseihem shel yisrael torah*). In all these choice points and the rationales that accompany them, it is reasonable to think we are also overhearing an apologia for Agnon's own path. In attempting to bring to life for the modern reader the world of Polish Jewry in its golden age, Agnon could not, for many obvious reasons, replicate the learned talmudic arguments that would form the substance of either the exchanges between scholars like R. Avraham and R. Mordechai or the account he would render of the tinsmith's scholarly erudition. It is the story of that learning that can be transmitted from that lost world to present readers, not the learning itself. But it would be a mistake to think that this is necessarily second best. Separate from the limited literacy of his readers, one suspects that this is what Agnon himself wants. Despite his own love for rabbinic learning, he loves story more, and this is his inexpugnable modernity.

Second, also intrinsic to Agnon's modernity is the acknowledgement that writing fiction inevitably means taking leave to reveal things without permission. Art and the enlarging of reality are the higher ends that justifies proximate, unsanctioned disclosures. This is the dilemma R. Avraham finds himself in. He has made a solemn oath to preserve R. Mordechai's anonymity. R. Mordechai exacted the oath not out of fastidiousness but out of obedience to the profound teachings of his master, the elderly rabbi who had seen first-hand the calamities brought on by the whims of gentile rulers and who taught his student to remain elusive of dependence on gentile and Jewish authority. Yet when the delegation from Buczacz arrives, it takes very little for him to violate his promise and reveal the tinsmith's true identity. To justify

**Comment [JS35]:** I don't agree. He doesn't include the transcripts of the learned discourse bec that doesn't work as a story(\*). He's writing a piece of literature, nit chiddushei Torah.

Think of great movies about sports. You can't show the whole boxing match or baseball game – not just because you're very limited by time – but because it's really boring: 2 hours of boredom with 5 moments of really great excitement, so that's what you show on the screen. Same thing here. If he "gives over" the whole shiur it simply doesn't work in a novel. When he does attempt this, it came at the expense of the flow of story (see e.g chapter 37 of Shmei Talmidei Chachamim – weakest chapter in the story!) think of it more as a shadow puppet show: He only has to give the outline of the event, the readers mind fills in the rest. All we need to know here is that they are engaged in learned debate about weighty matters.

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his decision, the rabbi invoked the maxim from Pirkei Avot that “each man has his hour”; and in yielding to the exigency of Buczacz, he was deciding, unilaterally, that R. Mordechai’s hour had come. But once the deed has been done and the story told, at least the portion of it that reports the relations between the two men, we are in possession of evidence of other motives. Take, for example, the fact that when R. Avraham and his guests from Buczacz reassemble after morning prayers the company has expanded to include the locals, the notables from Zabno. The relevance of R. Mordechai’s true identity for Buczacz’s rabbinic search is clear. Allowing the Jews of Zabno to be privy to this disclosure addresses a need that is far less official than emotionally exigent. It allows R. Avraham to let the cat out of the bag and reveal to his congregants and supporters that his nocturnal visitor has been neither Elijah or the Holy Ari but a colleague whose immense learning puts his own in its place rather than inflating it. But there is a motive deeper than the relief provided by the removal of an unbearable burden. By telling R. Mordechai’s story, R. Avraham maintains and even relives his vital but lost connection to his study partner. Feelings of connection, fellow-feeling and dependence had been opened up in the rabbi’s soul for the first time; and then, without warning, the object of these feelings withdrew. The abandonment has left R. Avraham bereft, and the only way to maintain connection with the object lost to him is to tell his story, and this he does with great intensity and epic sweep.

But this grand narrative, finally, which leaps from a shuttered inn of a small village to vast reaches of land and water and the highest echelons of Jewish-gentile relations, cannot be told simply or directly. There is a nicely ironic moment when the two narratives, R. Avraham’s monologue and the frame story of the embassy to Zabno, intersect.

R. Mordechai sat down and began to tell his story. But when the Rabbi of Zabno got to this part of his narrative, the same thing happened that had taken place every time R. Mordechai was about to tell the story of his past. The steps of the shamash would interrupt him and he would take his leave from the Rabbi of Zabno without telling his story until that final time, when he did render his account. Now, when the Rabbi of Zabno was about to render *his* account, they heard the footfalls of the shamash and his cry, “Sleepers, awake and rise for the worship of the Creator!” (328)

The awkward repetitions in this passage, certainly not accidental, call our attention to the overlap of meaning between the frame story and the monologue contained within it. Central to both is the experience of deferral. The inverted Scheherazade motif, in which each night R. Mordechai avoids telling his story to the repeatedly experienced frustration of R. Avraham, crosses over into the main narrative. Already on the edge of their seats, the visitors from Buczacz will have to be patient and wait for the mysterious origins of this hidden genius to be disclosed. And once that story is complete and the monologue brought to an end, they will have before them the return trip to Buczacz, the delivery of the surprising news to their fellow townspeople, and, ultimately, the rejection of their offer by R. Mordechai. A great deal happens before that final disappointment, but it is all old news in the sense that it took place in the past. The structure of the novella is recursive. We begin with the account of R. Avraham’s relationship with R. Mordechai; then we proceed by going back to the story of R. Mordechai’s origins; next we get the leviathan of a back story about Reuven and Shimon, which is what the elderly rabbi, R. Mordechai’s teacher, saw that made him flee. And so we readers become trained in the sweet discipline of deferral.



## ORIGINS OF THE HERO

We are rewarded for our patience by eventually discovering the reasons for unexplained behaviors. Why is R. Mordechai so adamant about concealing his greatness? Why does he dismiss out of hand the possibility of accepting the office of community rabbi? Why must he move to a different city in order to have fewer gentile employers? We might write off his choices to temperament and perversity if we did not have the narrative that comes next. What we will discover—all in good time, of course—is that the integrity of the rabbinate is highly vulnerable to calamitous interference on the part of the ruling gentile powers. Yet this political dimension is largely absent from the first story, which is enclosed within the hidden, intimate exchanges between the two Torah scholars.

It is exactly this dimension that is foregrounded in the opening lines of “R. Mordechai verabo” [R. Mordechai and His Teacher], the second narrative unit in the novella “Hamevakshim lahem rav or beruah hamoshel.”

R. Mordechai’s birth was owed to the commandment of ransoming of captives. For his father redeemed a young woman from captivity and then married her properly according to the laws of Moses and Israel. The son she gave birth to was called Mordechai after the name of her father, who departed from this world in the midst of fleeing from the wrath of a lord.

Let us now relate the details. (331)

Those details prove to be interesting and complicated, but it is obviously a matter of urgency for the narrator to begin by condensing their import into a banner headline. The job of this story is to present the origins of the hero, and those origins are inextricably embroiled in the experience of persecution. His mother’s life has been decisively shaped by her victimization, and her son’s name is a memorial to her father’s death under conditions of cruel oppression. Added to their ranks will soon be the figure of the anonymous saintly rabbi, fleeing for his life from the malevolent reach of a great nobleman. Fortunately, this opening précis also cites an act that resists this cycle of suffering and foreshadows the role R. Mordechai will one day play in restoring the integrity of Torah learning. Even though ransoming captives (*pidyon shevuyim*) is an important ethical imperative, it is usually undertaken by communities in collective negotiation with an enemy captor. The private initiative undertaken by R. Mordechai’s father is an entirely spontaneous act of kindness.

The story displays a fine-grained attention to the historical moment and the shifting winds of power. Take, for example, the plot’s originating misfortune. The family of Sarah Rivkah, Mordechai’s mother, operated a tavern on a leasehold from the local Polish lord. The meager profits from the tavern could not satisfy the lord’s cupidity, and he repeatedly threaten to take action against the tavern keeper. Knowing he cannot pay the mounting debts and knowing what the lord is capable of, the Jew flees with his daughter. He dies when they are apprehended by the lord’s men and the daughter is taken from her father’s corpse and imprisoned in a pit, where she too will surely die because her jailers steal the food allotted to her. This grim scenario is one that could—and was—played out at any point over the course of the seventeenth or



eighteenth centuries when local Polish lords and estate administrators answered to no law but their own.

Now there is a second episode involving a tavern, and the circumstances under which it plays out indicate that an important historical corner has been turned. Once Sarah Rivkah has been ransomed and married to Yisrael Natan, they settle in the city, where he is an assistant to a successful merchant. But instead of flourishing she declines; she cannot abide the city and longs to return to village life. Her situation is so dire that Yisrael Natan is ready to abandon the career for which he had been training all his life and relocate to the countryside. The merchant is sad to lose his protégé, but he cares about his welfare enough to help him find a way to manage the change. It so happens that a Polish lord he knows has built an upscale country inn and is looking for a lessee to run it. In his shrewd negotiation with the lord, the merchant points out that times have changed and it is no longer possible to resort to brute force to intimidate and extract payment of the leasehold fees. If the lessor does not have the money to pay then “there is nothing you can do to him, not even throwing him in a pit. Former times were very different from the situation now under His Majesty the Kaiser” (335). Under these new conditions, the argument continues, what counts is a talent for management—which Yisrael Natan has in abundance—because if a Jew can’t pay his fees, what does torture avail, or as the merchant puts it pungently in order to appeal to the lord, “you can’t make sauce out of tears.”

The mention in passing of the His Majesty the Kaiser provides us with a key locus of orientation for the succession of narratives in this novella. The partition of Poland, in which the Polish lands that would make up the province of Galicia passed to the sovereignty of Austria, took place in 1772 and 1775. From the merchant’s remarks we understand that this momentous shift has taken place only recently, so much so that the lord has not yet absorbed the implications for the exercise of his own authority. This dividing line enables us to grasp in a general way the time line of the narratives within “Hamevakshim lahem rav or beruah hamoshel.” The birth and education of R. Mordechai, as well as his later encounter with R. Avraham, take place after the partition; and grand narrative about Reuven and Shimon before. The effect of the imposition of an Austrian administration on the Polish nobility is a complex phenomenon that will be explored elsewhere in this study. On the one hand, with the institution of an imperial legal system the nobles were no longer law unto themselves; on the other, they maintained much of their wealth and influence. Although Agnon notes these difference with a keen eye, the advent of the Austrians simply compounds and enlarges the concept of gentile interference. Both the old nobility and the new rulers constitute the “whim of the ruler” (*ruah hamoshel*), which remains toxic to the higher study of Torah and to the possibility of a pure and disinterested rabbinate.

The abandonment of the city for the village is the central moment in the first half of the story. It is ostensibly a regressive movement because in these stories Jews generally aspire to move to town, where they can live among their brethren, pray in a quorum and educate their children. The city, moreover, is the place where more advanced commerce flourishes, in contrast to the countryside where the principle occupation is tavern keeping. Yisrael Natan would seem to be the embodiment of this urban entrepreneurial spirit. Eager, ambitious, and loyal, he is apprenticed to a successful merchant, who treats him like a son—he has a sister and brother-in-law in town but no parents--and in whose house he sleeps in the attic among the merchandise for trade. The day he accidentally comes upon the ruins of the tavern Sarah Rivkah’s father operated happens to be the first time his mentor had given him the authority to act on his behalf in a commercial transaction, and the young man is very proud of his new status. The instinctive act of ransoming Sarah Rivkah changes everything and reverses the trajectory of his life. His efforts



to incorporate her into his city life fail, and, in a second instance of love and kindness, he gives up his promising career in order to save her from a wasting melancholy. To be sure, the inn he operates is more like a boutique bed-and-breakfast than the old-style tavern catering to thirsty peasants; but it remains a reversion to an older Jewish occupation whose essence is serving the needs of gentile customers.

The retreat to the village is presented as a temporary seclusion that serves several purposes. It is necessary, to begin with, to restore Sarah Rivkah's mental health. The trauma of loss and victimization can be palliated only by contact with the rural life she is familiar with and its ongoing intimacy with nature. The seclusion is also providentially necessary for the purposes of hiding the rabbi in flight from persecution and providing him a venue in which to recover from *his* trauma. As an astute business move to preempt competition, Yisrael Natan had bought a disused inn on the other side of the village and planted foliage to conceal it from passers-by. This turns out to be the perfect "safe house" in which to place the rabbi, whose identity and whereabouts require extreme protection. The Jewish marginality of the village further provides the sort of sterile laboratory conditions under which the young Mordechai can grow up uncontaminated by erroneous notions about Jewish learning. His suitability as a *tabula rasa* is almost ruined by a boring and uncouth melamed brought to the village to instill in its ragged band of Jewish children some shreds literacy. Before the arrival of the elderly rabbi, Mordechai grows up in the lap of nature like the gentile children of the village devoting their time to climbing trees, imitating animal sounds, fishing and swimming. The pious narrator—remember that it is R. Avraham who is telling the story—accords no romantic pantheism to this scene as Bialik surely would have. He, like Mordechai's parents, is appalled that the boy is growing up ignorant of Torah. But it is not impossible that Agnon, who in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech stated that God's creation was his **chief inspiration**, accords to this "child of nature" phase a positive, propaedeutic function as a basis for the textual learning that will be placed upon it. Finally, the isolation of the village together with the hidden house secreted within it create a multivalent parallel between the first and second stories in the novella. The secret tutorial R. Mordechai receives from the rabbi in the second corresponds to the secret nocturnal meetings he conducts with R. Avraham in the first. Because the stories are reversed in time, we now discover that later relationship has a precursor in the concealed dyadic intimacy of the boy and the aged scholar.

The function of this story, it should be recalled, is to satisfy R. Avraham's unrelenting curiosity about how so formidable a scholar as R. Mordechai could come from nowhere. The second half of the story therefore sets about answering this question by describing the formation of the young-scholar-to-be, which is presented as a two-stage process. The first stage is devoted wholly to observation. The rabbi—whose name, like that of the village, is withheld in order to conform to the protocols of secrecy—is discovered in a nearly catatonic state wandering in a random field when Yisrael Natan goes in search of a lost cow. His feet are so swollen and blistered that Yisrael Natan has to wash them and apply salve. The reader is left to imagine how many days he has been in flight and what it means for a respected and elderly rabbi of an important community to leave his family and everything familiar to him and how terrified he must have been and how real he believed the threat to be in order simply to walk out the door and into the woods. It takes a long and unspecified time for the rabbi to thaw, as it were, and return to himself. It is during this interval that Mordechai observes him closely.<sup>10</sup> The boy has been assigned by his father to see to the rabbi's needs. He brings his daily meal and ferries over his father's tallit and tefilin—so exigent was his escape that even these were left behind!—after

**Comment [JS36]:** Wrong. He says chief inspiration was:  
 "First and foremost, there are the Sacred Scriptures, from which I learned how to combine letters. Then there are the Mishna and the Talmud and the Midrashim and Rashi's commentary on the Torah. After these come the *Poskim* - the later explicators of Talmudic Law - and our sacred poets and the medieval sages, led by our Master Rabbi Moses, son of Maimon, known as Maimonides, of blessed memory."

Nature is 3<sup>rd</sup> on the list.

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his father has donned them. Mordechai has never seen a rabbi, and, at such close quarters, he has abundant opportunity to observe him.

For the quick-witted boy, the rabbi is a source of endless puzzlement. The enormous reverence his parents feel toward the rabbi is an attitude he has seen them express to no other person, even to Hasidim who occasionally pass through the inn. Alone in the hideaway, the rabbi spends his days seated with his eyes closed and his hands on his knees while he keeps up a barely audible conversation with himself. When he listens closely, Mordechai picks up a series of strange names, which the reader recognizes as the great later commentators on the Talmud. The rabbi is conducting scholarly inquiries from memory and restaging the dialectics of Torah study in his mind. When the boy observes him in prayer, the words are uttered with such fervor it is as if he is hearing and understanding them for the first time. The "Ahavah Rabbah," the second blessing before the Shema in the morning service, describes how God's love for Israel is expressed by the giving of the Torah and the commandments. As the rabbi inhabits each word of the prayer with intense mindfulness, Mordechai experiences his first intimation about the nexus between love and revelation. He is further astounded when he witnesses the rabbi performing the *tiquin hatsot* ritual, the midnight vigil mourning the destruction of Jerusalem. He cannot comprehend how it is possible that such a saintly and distinguished man as the rabbi should have to flee for his life from the Duke. He goes on to reason that the Exile must be responsible for this vulnerability to gentile will, and he further intuitively feels that it is better to be an artisan than a rabbi in order to elude provoking the ire of the regime.

All this is absorbed simply through observation and despite the fact that the rabbi remains in his shell-shocked state. When he emerges from his trauma and returns to himself, the rabbi takes note of the boy who has been serving him and offers to teach him Torah. This is the beginning of the second stage of Mordechai's formation. The rabbi sends to Yisrael Natan to have volumes of Talmud and Maimonides provided him only to discover that such things do not exist in the village. So the rabbi makes do with the only text available, the *Humash* with Rashi's commentary, the most basic primer in the Jewish library. The obstacle is turned into an opportunity. The rabbi is delighted to discover that the entire edifice of post-biblical Jewish law (Mishnah, Talmud and all the early and later commentators) can be derived from the verses of Scripture and, far from being merely an expediency imposed by the scarcity of books, this is in fact the proper way to study Torah.

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Implicit in this discovery is a sharp critique of what passes for sophisticated scholarship and pedagogy, and this is connected to the complaints discussed at the beginning of this chapter about the preparation of rabbis in Galicia and Poland. Young men are being trained to be able to make showy use of the arguments of the early modern Talmud exegetes (the *Aharonim*) so that they can appear formidable in their learning and make a name for themselves in current scholarly debates. This educational regime perversely inverts the pyramid of learning, which properly should end with the later authorities rather than begin with them. The Bible is the foundation from which all follows—as Mordechai's teacher is demonstrating—but the reality in yeshivot is that students rarely study Scripture and come across it only when it is quoted in the Talmud. This is the case as well with the Mishnah, which is not accorded its own study and which is encountered as decontextualized fragments, also in the Talmud. And the plain meaning of the Talmud itself often becomes merely grist for the mill of over-ingenious legal disputations. The study and elaboration of Jewish law, the halakhah, has been dangerously cut off from the fundamentals that undergird it and supply its divine authority.

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There are, to be sure, great scholars who have mastery over the body of laws and know the opinions of the posqim. They may even know the source of a certain law in the Gemara. . . . But they are ignorant of the verse in the Divine Quarry from which the law was hewn. (343)

By beginning with the “Divine Quarry”, i.e. Scripture, and building upwards, the rabbi is working to purge the existing educational regime of its systemic upside-down error and shaping a disciple who will help to bring the world of Torah back into alignment.

Mordechai’s education, then, rather than suffering from the absence of texts, instead becomes a grand experiment, on the model of Rousseau, in writing the right words on the blank slate of the boy’s eager mind. It helps in no small measure that Mordechai possesses a perfect memory. It would be imprecise to say he has a photographic memory because, except for the text of the Hebrew Bible itself—plus Rashi’s commentary--the vast reservoir of the texts of the Tradition are imparted to him by the rabbi orally. The printed text of a single tractate of the Talmud providentially falls into their hands, but this takes place after the basic regime of study has been established and serves mainly as a springboard for learning—again, orally--about discussions that take place elsewhere in the talmudic corpus. The oral nature of the education imparted to Mordechai turns out to be of signal importance in establishing the norm of rabbinic learning in *‘Ir umelo’ah*. It is through oral transmission, of course, that Moses received the Oral Torah at Sinai, and it was by the precise memorization of oral statements in the first and second centuries of the Common Era that the early rabbis, the Tannaim, compiled the Mishnah. Committing oral teachings to writing was viewed by the Rabbis as a concession to historical necessity rather than a sign of arrival.

For these reasons, the exchange between the rabbi and Mordechai presents itself as something more than another instance of a teacher-student relationship. The relationship, we have observed, has two essential features. It roots itself in the fundamentals of the Bible and arrives at later teachings through a step-by-step process of exegetical demonstration; and it takes place by word of mouth and relies on the exertions of individual memory. This pedagogical transaction provides, to be sure, a model for how the Torah should properly be taught. But it does something more: It restages and recapitulates the drama of the transmission of the Tradition by the early sages in the time of Mishnah. It is as if Mordechai and his teacher are giving the world of learning a chance to start over again and rebuild itself based on the pure and true principles that have been lost sight of.

Even a phenomenal memory such as Mordechai’s could not contain the whole of the Oral Law without some trick or method. Throughout history there have been many schemes for organizing memory. Jonathan Spence presented a remarkable one in his study of the sixteenth-century Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci, who traveled to China and wrote, in Chinese, a book on the art of memory, which proposed constructing a “memory palace” in whose various chambers are placed the various items to be remembered.<sup>11</sup> In a manner not so dissimilar, Mordechai’s teacher proposes taking the myriad of rabbinic laws and sugiyot from the Talmud and attaching them to the relevant verses in the Bible. The rabbi trains Mordechai’s mind to see key verses as containing and leading to long threads of rabbinic learning, and because the text of the Bible has been made into an inalienable possession of Mordechai’s mind it can serve as an organizing gateway to the ocean of post-biblical knowledge, each verse clearly leading to a defined and retrievable portion. At the very end of the novella, when a new delegation of Buczacz notables approach R. Mordechai’s house in order, finally, to offer him the rabbinate of the city, they hear

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him learning aloud and quoting word-for-word from arcane legal sources; but when they enter the house, they are astounded to find that there no books at all and the scholar has been working entirely from memory. Unbeknownst to them, they were already inside one of the chambers in R. Mordechai's memory palace.

This story, "R. Mordechai and His Teacher," the second narrative unit within the novella, concludes on an idyllic note.

There were no days of Torah for the rabbi and his student like those in which they were utterly cut off from the whole world and sat and reflected on the Torah. For the Torah expands the mind, strengthens the soul and makes one forget the troubles of the world. (345)

The fact that the rabbi can forget the troubles of the world after what he has seen is indeed a great tribute to the healing power of Torah study. Because of the inverted time structure of the novella, we the readers do not yet know what it is he *has* seen, and that, in fact, is the title of the next story "What the Rabbi Saw That Made Him Flee." But in this interval between the fact of his flight and our looming discovery of the evil that caused it, there is a moment of perfection. A scholar and his student together study Torah for its own sake and do so in a way that recaptures the original purity of the act of study and transmission. This consummation joins the picture of the late-night exchanges between R. Avraham and R. Mordechai—later in real time, earlier in the progress of the story—to render a model of Torah study and scholarship in their most ideal form, which in turn form a central, normative pillar in the spiritual and conceptual organization of the universe of classical Buczacz as presented by Agnon in *'Ir umelo'ah*. But make no mistake: The purity of these moments is wholly conditional upon their isolation from society. What I translated in the passage above as "utterly cut off from the world," is a gloss on a set of Hebrew terms (*perushim umufrashim ubedeilim umuvdalim*) whose grammatical and rhetorical doubleness further underscores the removal from society. But this is a condition that is so difficult to meet, as we shall soon see, as to render the norm an important ideal but one whose power is largely virtual and heuristic.

## FISH AND SALT

The second half of the novella is so vastly different from the first that the narrator is constrained to address the reader directly: "Be assured that in the end everything will connect back to the beginning, to the holy community of Buczacz that went in search of a rabbi and to R. Mordechai, some of whose praises we have already heard" (345). No small amount of assurance is indeed necessary because the narrative arc of the story sweeps us so far from Buczacz that we often wonder if return is a possibility. But for the time being let us defer questions of coherence and proximity in favor of appreciating just how far afield Agnon permits himself to go. It will be recalled that the two narrative units that make up the second half ("What the Rabbi Saw That Made Him Flee" and "Water in Water") tell the story of the conflict between Reuven and Shimon, two wealthy Jews with contacts in the highest reaches of the Polish nobility in an unnamed region of the country.<sup>12</sup> Reuven seeks and obtains the leasehold to rebuild and operate two large fish ponds, which are located adjacent to Shimon's already operating salt works.<sup>13</sup>

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Shimon protests that an overflow from the ponds could destroy his operation, which is exactly eventually what happens, but not before the ponds are refurbished and Reuven is praised for the abundance of fish they produce. Shimon retaliates by hijacking a large shipment of fish Reuven had promised to a military commander for a special feast. The conflict between the two and their aristocratic backers threatens to destabilized Polish Jewry, and the higher councils of the larger community intervene to force them to settle their differences through adjudication in a beit din. At the head of the court sits the venerable rabbi who later becomes R. Mordechai's teacher. After prolonged deliberations, the rabbi decides in favor of one and against the other; but as soon as the ruling is handed down, the Duke, who is a confidant of the losing party, seeks to reverse the verdict by throwing the rabbi in prison. That is what the rabbi saw that made him flee.

Comment [JS37]: Repetative

The unmistakable differences between the two halves of the novella can be summarized under several headings. (1) Whereas the action in the first part takes places in hidden, closeted spaces (R. Avraham's study, the secret inn) and in the context of intimate and discrete relationships, in the second part the action unfolds in vast, outdoor spaces and among figures whose movements are public and widely observed. (2) With one or two small exceptions, gentile authorities are nowhere to be seen in the first stories; the later stories, in contrast, dramatize direct transactions between wealthy Jewish merchants and high-ranking Polish nobles, upon whose wills and desires—as indicated by the second half of the novella's title—the fate of many depends. (3) Time and space in the first half are recognizably Jewish; the events take place in Buczacz, Zabno and the hidden inn, and time is marked by the need to offer morning and afternoon prayers. In the second half, events take place in the drawing rooms of the nobility or in the limitless open spaces of fields and rivers—with the one exception of Reuven's being trapped in synagogue and home during the great rains--and time is marked by the seasons and the elements with no mention of Jewish holidays or the Jewish calendar. (4) In the first stories, the examples of man's interaction with the physical world are limited the objects Mordechai and his uncle fabricate as master tinsmiths; in the later stories, the scope of the earthworks Reuven undertakes to put the fish ponds into operation and later to protect them from destruction, deploying thousands of serfs, is nothing less than Promethean. (5) Whereas in the first half knowledge of Torah and respect for Torah are the markers of worth and authority, in the second the correlation is inverse or negative. Although Shimon is acknowledged as a talmid hakham, he exploits his Torah knowledge to berate his workers and deride his competitor. Finally, (6) in the second half, the sway of Jewish jurisprudence, which earlier on is so central to the exchanges between R. Avraham and R. Mordechai, is challenged, marginalized and, finally, undercut.

If, for the sake of argument, we make a radical reduction of these factors, we can say that the first half of the novella takes place in a domesticated Jewish sphere and the second half takes place in the natural world and the sphere of gentile relations. That binary accords well with the bipartite title for the novella: "Hamevakeshim lahem rav o beruah hamoshel" [In Search of a Rabbi, Or at the Will of the Ruler]. What is the relationship between these two? The narrator takes this divergence as a challenge of emplotment: How can he fashion a credible and coherent story line that, after traveling so far from the orbit of Buczacz and its rabbinic search, can be brought back home? The reader who accepts the narrator's encouragement to be patient and stays with the story to its end will indeed be witness to the two pieces being snapped together. This closure may be a virtuoso instance of storytelling construction, but on a deeper, deconstructive level the gentile part of the plot is not folded back into the Jewish part. Jewish existence and gentile power remain stubbornly unconnectable.

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The grandiose, outsize scope of Reuven's enterprises draw forth from Agnon a kind of writing that cannot be found in his other work, and perhaps not in the canon of modern Hebrew literature altogether. This new kind of writing is necessitated by Reuven's penetration and manipulation of the material, natural world. When we first meet Reuven he is already a man of considerable means. He is an arrendator who has leased the fishing rights to a river from a very powerful unnamed noblewoman. Fresh fish are a highly sought-after commodity, but be their skittish habits, appearing and disappearing unpredictably in different parts of the river, makes catching them is an inherently unreliable business. To overcome the quixotic nature of nature, Reuven comes up with a scheme to rebuild two huge and long-unused fish ponds on the noblewoman's lands.<sup>14</sup> Reuven proposes to invest his considerable capital and provide the managerial supervision of artisans and engineers if the noblewoman will provide the army of serfs, whose labor she owns, necessary to clear the pond beds of generations' worth of rocks, earth and refuse. The agreement is struck, and the noblewoman, who owns 999 villages, issues an order requiring two or three stout youths from each village to report for duty.<sup>15</sup> Reuven divides them into two camps, one for each pond, and they set to work hauling and clearing the accumulated detritus of decades so that springs that originally had fed the ponds can be unstoppered. In the meantime, he hires specialists from abroad to design and construct a system of sluices and spillways capable of controlling the water level in the ponds and preventing the possibility of overflow. Reuven succeeds in realizing this huge project with its steep organizational and technical challenges. The ponds are stocked and the fish multiply. Jewish and gentiles alike are graced with an abundance of reasonably-priced fresh fish, which creates a welcome *entente* in their relations.<sup>16</sup> For an unspecified number of years, until calamity strikes and all is lost, Reuven's enterprise is a huge and celebrated success benefiting all concerned. The success is more than commercial; the prosperity and blessing associated with fish endow this period with an edenic aura.

Behind Reuven's colossal ambitions and his massive engineering project lies the myth of Prometheus in its romantic scientific version. The name is of course nowhere mentioned in the text, and such an association would be unthinkable in the mind of the pious narrator. But that does not stop us as worldly readers nor Agnon as a worldly author from identifying Reuven's ambitions as promethean, especially in these later sections of the novella that are so drained of Judaic reference. Reuven's practical ingenuity, mercantile zeal, and entrepreneurial fearlessness lead him to a particularly modern form of hubris. He believes that he can tame nature and harness it for human profit and benefit and that rationale planning can successfully anticipate the vagaries of the elements. Putting these schemes into practice requires the tangible fabrication and manipulation of the material world on a vast scale. Here Agnon faced a choice. He could have merely reported, suggested, summarized, or referred to the nature and scope of these activities *in their generality*; this would have been the expected course for a writer largely concerned with the ethical and spiritual consequences of human affairs.

But Agnon does the unexpected and aggressively immerses himself in the realm of the radically material and concrete. Here, for example, is a description of the techniques used to drive great pillars that will support the sluices into the floor of the ponds.

How were the sluices constructed? There were beams in the noblewoman's possession from the days of Popial and Piast when these lands were uninterrupted forest.<sup>17</sup> The beams had become hardened as if they had been placed in a kiln and as black as pitch; they were fourteen cubits high and two cubits in diameter. The

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Comment [JS38]: or did you mean detente?

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workers poured tar on them, surrounded them with branches of tender twigs, poured on more tar and then applied molten lead over all. Next, they took barrels, which had the height of a man and the diameter of a man, and inserted one beam in each barrel. After that, they surveyed the noblewoman's many forests, some of which are so extensive that it takes at least a half day to traverse them, to find two trees of extraordinary height and girth.

They cut down the trees and stuck them in the ground next to each other and rigged a rope and pulley at their top that functioned like a scale, such that when one was full the other was depressed. A barrel with a beam inside was attached to the ropes, and eight men on either side hoisted it up until it reached the top. When they let it go, it hurtled downward and struck with such force that the barrel with the beam burrowed deep into the earth. The impact was so fierce that sound was heard throughout the countryside. All who observed how the barrel and beam were planted in the ground declared that all the winds in the world could never budge the barrel from the ground nor the beam from the barrel and therefore all the worries raised by Shimon were without merit. (349)

Every object and activity in this passage bespeaks superlativeness. The lumber is the hardest and most ancient, the barrels the stoutest imaginable, the trees the tallest in the vast forests, the fit of the beams in the barrels undislodgeable, and so on. The hugeness of nature is matched and bested by the hugeness of human effort. Through ingenuity and invention, the giantism of nature is domesticated and converted into devices and emplacements that are equally giant but now serve human purposes. Even though Reuven and his engineers have devised these plans, their execution in this passage seems undertaken by an anonymous, collective human will arrayed to grapple with Nature. In this encounter, religion and nationality are irrelevant and all markings of Jewishness have been erased. This immersion in gentile space is underscored—not without irony—by the total focus on material objects and their fabrication and manipulation. Nowhere else in Agnon's vast corpus is there a description of the materials of the physical world that is so tactile and so attentive to the independent reality of things in the world.

One has to look back to the Mishnah to find a similar language of materiality in postbiblical Jewish literature. Although the Mishnah has often been pointed to, correctly, as the model for the clarity and symmetry of Agnon's Hebrew sentences, the content of his writing has had more to do with human agency than with the "thingness" of the created world. In such passages as the one above in this section of the novella, we are witness to a fascinating substitution. In order to represent the "gentile" space of vast construction projects, armies of serfs battling ice flows, and flooding and extreme weather—the realia of the real world, as it were—Agnon gives up his measured and regular mishnaic style in favor of a novelistic, naturalistic flow of descriptive language that is adapted to cycles of human activity and natural forces. In addition to the description of the construction of the earthworks for the ponds, this kind of new writing is on display in two more extended sequences of epic proportions. After a sudden thaw following a frigid winter, the ice on the ponds breaks up into ice flows that threaten to wash over the containing walls (353-56). Again the army of serfs is summoned, and armed with ancient feudal weapons from the castle armory, they man the perimeter of the ponds to deflect the ice flows. The great catastrophe—the collapse of the system of sluices and spillways-

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-comes later in the season when the rapidly melting ice and snow is joined both by unrelenting rain and a great upsurge from underground wells on the floor of the ponds (357-68).

Yet before the implacability of nature reasserts itself and wipes away Reuven's Promethean projects, there is a palpable if illusory period of grace. During a stretch of years—the number is not given—in which nature behaves predictably, there is a reign of harmony in the feudal relations among the Poles, the Jews and the Ruthenian/Ukrainian peasantry. The gentry take pleasure in their skating parties on the frozen surface of the ponds. Wealthy Jews prosper from the profits on their leaseholds and contribute generously to charity while their brethren enjoy a period of lessened persecution. The peasants plant and harvest and subsist. This is an entente based, in large measure, on fish. Reuven's success in regularizing and increasing the supply of fresh fish and suppressing its price is a blessing bestowed upon all. Evident in the depiction of this idyll are the echoes of the creation story in Genesis. Man as the crown of creation has asserted his rule over the creatures of the water and ushered the world into an Edenic state.

It is little wonder then that when the sluices collapse and the countryside is flooded and Shimon's salt works are washed away that the calamity should also be cast in the terms of the primeval creation story. The title of the final narrative unit is "Mayim bemayim" [Water Within Water]; the unrelenting rains upon the melted snow and ice are the "upper waters," and the suddenly unstopped underground springs below the ponds are the "lower waters." In Genesis 1:7-8, heaven and earth are created by separating the waters above the firmament from those below. In the story of the Flood that follows, the dry land of human habitation is swallowed up by the rejoining of the upper and lower waters.<sup>18</sup> It is precisely this return to primordial chaos that Reuven surveys when he sits astride his horse, whose feet are so deeply mired in the mud that it is stuck in place. The individual contours of hills, valleys, fields, ponds, and rivers have erased and submerged in the unforgiving flood waters. The great hierarchical world, momentarily propped up by human cleverness and sustained by an abundance of good things, has fallen into chaos. The fish ponds and the salt works are destroyed and the fields of the peasants rendered useless. The visual intensity and epic sweep of these chapters are extraordinary, and they deserve the sort of close attention that cannot be given to them now. They give us an intriguing glimpse into a kind of realistic-naturalistic prose Agnon was supremely capable of writing but chose largely to keep in reserve, perhaps viewing the material world it described as gentile space.

The scene of watery chaos comes into focus through Reuven's consciousness. However much we the readers may be shaken and disheartened by the devastation, Reuven remains stoic and attentive to his economic interests. The young serfs who drowned while staving off the ice flows, the ruin of the peasants' fields and therefore their livelihood, the obliteration of Shimon's salt works, and the very fact of his dire predictions of catastrophe—none of these are present to his mind. His sole concern is the wagon loads of fish he had contracted to supply for an army banquet and the valuable jewel he had given as a surety. With his own supply wiped out, he makes arrangements to purchase fish from another source only to have his shipment forcibly intercepted by agents of Shimon, who is enraged over the losses he has suffered.

This is the pivot point of the novella. The vast vistas, the titanic ambitions to harness the natural world, and the chaotic force of the elements all disappear. In their place our attention is redirected—whether we like it or not—to the political intrigues among wealthy Jews and powerful Polish magnates and to the compromised efforts of the Jewish polity in Poland to submit the conflict between Reuven and Shimon to arbitration in Jewish courts. We feel the

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story being reeled back into the thematic orbit the narrator established at the beginning of the novella; the theme is Jewish learning and Jewish law as they are studied and applied by rabbis in the face of the gentile regime. Step by step the narrator is making good on his promise to return his narrative to Buczacz's problematic rabbinic search. However dazzled we may be by Reuven's promethean projects, by the eruptions of nature, and by the tactical moves of one grandee against another, we are now called upon to turn our attention to the impact of these adventures on the authority of Jewish law.

The entire novella, it is important to recall, is poised in its various parts around the shift from Polish autonomy to Austrian rule. The feud between Reuven and Shimon is the novella's last unit—excepting the final return to Buczacz—and, set in the period when great Polish magnates held sway, it is the earliest chronologically. It is also the very end of the period in which the Lithuanian-Polish Jewish polity was able to function as a meaningful body of corporate will and as a kind of sovereign juridical system. (The Council of Four Lands was abolished already in 1764, a decade before the Partition.) Agnon stages the conflict between Reuven and Shimon as a test case positioned along this unstable fault line. The question is thus posed: Is the institution of Jewish law, both in its applied practice and its larger authority, capable of handling this crisis? The practical consequences could not be more dire. The narrator adduces the case of a rivalry between wealthy and powerful Jews in the Bohemia that was brought before the princes of the realm for adjudication and ended very badly for simple Jews as well as for the great. "Because of disputes among the rich," the narrator rues, "householders become impoverished and uprooted from their communities and must wander from exile to exile. The rich themselves did not escape without being displaced and banished with the rest of their Jewish brethren" (371).

If Reuven and Shimon are allowed to pursue their feud by leveraging their clout with various noble lords and maneuvering outside of the protocols of Jewish law, then the result could be a similar cascading of calamitous consequences at all levels of Jewish society. Therefore the elders of the Jewish metropolis Levov take note and bestir themselves to persuade the parties to the conflict to place their dispute before a *beit din*. If in the past it was in their power to insist, now it is a matter of persuasion. Their efforts take place against the background of two failed court procedures that took place before the great flooding. In both cases, Reuven and Shimon withdrew from the proceedings before a verdict was rendered because of impatience with the perceived ineptitude of the judges and their limited capacity for comprehending complex mercantile transactions. Now, in this third iteration, when terrible losses and damages are a fact rather than a speculation, the very capacity of the Jewish polity to contain this rupture is at stake.

While Reuven agrees right away, Shimon resists. The narrative devotes not a little space to visit of the elders of Levov to Shimon and the arguments they place before him. (This embassy is the second of the three embassies in the novella. It is framed by the journey of the delegation from Buczacz to Zabno at the very beginning and by the delegation, composed of a different set of notables, whose members offer the rabbinate of Buczacz to R. Mordechai at the very end.) Shimon presents himself as the righteous, aggrieved party and as the victim who had foreseen the disaster when no one would pay attention. It would therefore seem that he would have the most to gain from a *din torah*, a rabbinic adjudication. Yet because the world had for so long been the happy beneficiary of the seemingly endless supply of fresh fish provided by Reuven, Shimon questions whether he can get a fair trial. He is well versed in Torah knowledge—Reuven is not—and he uses his erudition to spar with the learned emissaries and evade their arguments. His animus against Reuven is fueled not only by the financial ruin visited

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upon him but also by the accommodations to gentile mores he claims Reuven makes in his dress and physical appearance and in the education of his daughters. In the last analysis, Shimon seeks to avoid the Jewish courts because he believes he can put his trust in the influence of the Duke to protect him. His wife's deceased first husband had rendered a valuable service to the Duke, and Shimon thinks he can count on this indebtedness to advance his interests.<sup>19</sup> But the visitors from Levov prove themselves to be even more up-to-date on the rivalries among the nobility, and they observe that whatever putative favors owed Shimon will count for nothing in the light of the active hatred the Duke has recently displayed to lord from whom Shimon had leased the commission for the salt works. To this argument Shimon must yield, and he finally agrees to hand the dispute over to a *beit din*. His recalcitrance has been overcome not by an appeal to the authority of Jewish law but by the calculation that his chances had dimmed in world of gentile power relations.

But even after the agreement of both man has been obtained, the first attempt to submit the case to a *beit din* is a humiliating public failure. The grandiosity of the arrangements is evident is the hyperbolic language. The notables of each man's city turn to the "statesmen and princes" [*alufim verozenim*] of the land, who, in turn, approach two extraordinary merchants [*soharim muflagim*], who are renowned for their wealth and their integrity, who then proceed to approach a rabbi with an international reputation. It is the rabbi who turns out to be the true man of integrity. The merchants make time available from their busy schedules and travel to the home of the rabbi, who lives in conditions of poverty that shock them. Rather than becoming the beginning of a legal proceeding, the visit is over almost before it has begun. With exquisite courtesy, the rabbi explains to his visitors that the commentators on the *Shulhan 'Arukh* hold a court composed, even in part, of laypeople rather than Torah scholars to be invalid. The merchants turn around and go home.

"There are, thank God," the narrator assures us, "rabbis in Poland who are expert in the affairs of the world" (377). This second attempt succeeds, or so we think. Each side nominates a distinguished rabbi as his advocate, and the two rabbis choose a third, and thus the *beit din* is complete. The third, elderly rabbi is "famous throughout the land for his greatness in Torah, piety and honesty," and he is, of course, none other than the rabbi who will become Mordechai's teacher. For five long days the arguments are presented in all their closely reasoned moral and legal complexity. Like all trials, there is a mixture of tedium and suspense. The younger rabbis fear at times that the attention and acuity of their older colleague may not be up to the task. Yet when they have rested their cases and there is nothing more to say, they are astonished by the elderly rabbi's total recall of every particular that has been uttered and his mastery of the relevant case law.

A verdict is rendered that acquits one party and finds the other culpable. Yet the verdict is an anti-climax twice over. As if he is boxing our ears for unseemly over-eagerness, the narrator withholds from us the identity of the winner. After we have followed the escapades of these two men for so long, the matter is simply dropped with no explanation. This provocation seems intended to burst the bubble of the melodramatic interest we have taken in the exploits of these high-flying Jewish grandees and in their intrigues they conduct among the nobility. (Is there not a degree of bad faith in this reproach? Is it not, after all, the narrator himself who has put these compelling affairs before us?) Yet our own disappointment pales in comparison to the blow dealt the verdict of the *beit din* by the Duke himself. The Duke rules over the city in which the elderly judge is the rabbi. Because the Duke's interests align him with the losing party, he orders his men to take the rabbi into custody for the purpose of forcing him to reverse the

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judgment; knowing what is in store for him, the rabbi flees. Thus, in one stroke, are swept aside the vast and concerted efforts of the leadership of Polish Jewry to maintain the sway of the Jewish legal system.

Failure at this elevated level of Jewish-gentile politics is echoed in a minor chord by the novella's conclusion: the final failure of Buczacz to make a rabbinic appointment. The delegates from Buczacz return home from Zabno ebullient with the news that a magnificent scholar has been living modestly in their own back yard. The community absorbs the news and consolidates its will to make the offer to R. Mordechai. When he is approached, he is astonished that R. Avraham has recommended him for the rabbinic post, an act that has in effect "outed" him. But rather than reject the offer outright, he agrees to give the matter three days of consideration in light of the honor due to opinion of the Rabbi of Zabno. Buczacz misreads his hesitancy as an expression of humility that precedes acceptance. In the meantime, word of the appointment reaches the gentile master of the city [*sar ha'ir*], who gives it his enthusiastic endorsement.<sup>20</sup> This agreement further strengthens the confidence and self-satisfaction of Buczacz; a distinguished delegation is put together to make the official presentation and finalize the appointment. With much ceremony and solemnity, they make their way to the tinsmith's house and make the offer, mentioning in course the approbation of the gentile official in order to cap the occasion. R. Mordechai is confounded and stupefied by this news, which renders his rejection of the offer absolute.<sup>21</sup> By the next day, he has taken his family and disappeared from Buczacz.

The conclusion to "Hamevaqshim lahem rav o beruah hamoshel" is rife with compositional problems, signified by the numerous instances of broken horizontal lines, which indicate breaks in the manuscript. The novella is sprawling and heterogeneous; Agnon's failing health did not permit him to return to the manuscript and linger over the problems of closure. Yet the trajectory is clear enough. It is an arc of failure, and that failure is the consequence of the unholy intermingling of power and rabbinic learning. Power is primarily gentile power, which inevitably exploits Jews for its own interests. But it is also power itself, the very desire for position and distinction even with the internal Jewish community, which must inevitably lead to the corruption of Torah.

So we are returned to the bifurcated nature of the novella. The second half of the novella turns on the tragic inevitability of grandiosity and power in the widest possible public sphere, whereas the first half, set later in time and in secret enclosures, offers two relationships (R. Avraham-R. Mordechai and R. Mordechai and his teacher) that exemplify disinterested Torah learning. If the events had been laid out in their natural chronological order, we might have been tempted to take these exemplary instances as redemptive antidotes to the "bad old days" of the scheming grandees and their fickle gentile protectors. By reversing the temporal order, Agnon first exposes us to a set of ideals and then plunges us into a world in which spiritual nobility cannot survive. We are left with the feeling that power will always and everywhere devour the norm of Torah no matter whether it is early or late, before or after. R. Mordechai, the putative hero of the novella, is the complete talmid hakham in his disinterested pursuit of Torah and his devotion to the active clarifications of its teachings. But at the same time he has foresworn all forms of leadership and declines to take responsibility for the application of his studies to the life of the community; he has gone so far as to conceal his gifts until the moment of his unwilling exposure. Aside from his testy independence, moreover, he is a man "without qualities" in the sense that we are shown nothing of his inner struggles, if they exist, in the way we are given access to R. Avraham's self-doubts and his need for connection. The novella's conclusion, then,

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is unequivocal. At this period of time in the life of Polish-Galician Jewry, the political conditions bearing down on the communal rabbinate make it impossible for that office to be occupied by true exemplars of Torah learning.

The bleakness of this conclusion admits one mitigation. From all this communal conflict and frustration there is at least a negative knowledge to be derived. To know the truth is a kind of consolation because it clarifies the norms of value around which the world is organized, despite the disappointments of reality. The monitory insight around which the message of the story is crystallized is made explicit in a scene that Agnon inserts into the penultimate position in the novella. After finishing the chronicle of Reuven and Shimon, R. Avraham brings his great monologue to a close by returning to the story of R. Mordechai and his teacher (380-83). Representatives of the rabbi's town have come to the village to return him in glory, the Duke's carriage waiting at the ready. He insists that they come back for him after Shabbat, and he uses the interval to take leave from his pupil by sitting and learning with him one last time. The text is *Pirkei Avot*, which is customarily studied on Shabbat afternoons during the summer months. But there is nothing customary or accidental about the individual mishnah (1:10) chosen for scrutiny.

*Ehov et hamelakhah usen'a et harabanut ve'al titvad'a larashut.*

Love work, loath mastery over others, and avoid intimacy with the government.

It is no small stroke of genius on Agnon's part to adduce this laconic, tripartite statement, which brings together the work's key themes, and make it the cognitive climax of the novella. The effectiveness of the text for this purpose turns on a willed misprision of the term *rabanut*. No commentator, traditional or modern, would mistakenly parse the word as an equivalent for "the rabbinate." *Rabanut* does not take on that meaning until the Middle Ages. In rabbinic Hebrew—the author of the statement, Shemaya, belongs to the famous "pairs" who lived while the Temple still stood—the term means love of high office, domination, and mastery over others. But at the conclusion of this long narrative that hinges on the question of whether or not to be co-opted into the rabbinate, the opportunity is too good to pass up.

The venerable rabbi, Mordechai's teacher, is an admirable figure on many counts, but there is one, according to his own lights, on which he falls short. Looking up from his parsing of the mishnah, he plaintively delivers his last words to his pupil.

When I was a lad I longed to become a rabbi. Once I entered the rabbinate, I neither loved nor hated it. Now, with everything that has happened to me, I am in a position to fulfill the commandment "Loath the rabbinate." But I have not merited fulfilling the commandment "Love work" because I have no other trade to offer. I wish I shall have no need for "intimacy with the government," even when it seemingly works to my benefit. (383)

Even if it was too late for him, his pupil learned well.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The meaning of the Hebrew in Isaiah 18:2, *memushakh umorat*, is obscure.

<sup>2</sup> On the relationship between the magnates and Jewish communities, see Gershon David Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century: A Genealogy of Modernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004): 84-86, 108-9, 112-17; and M. J. Rosman, *The Lord's Jews: Magnate-Jewish Relations in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge MA: Harvard U. P., 1990): on arrendators 106-142.

<sup>3</sup> On the state of the rabbinate in this period, see Adam Teller, "Tradition and Crisis? Eighteenth-Century Critiques of the Polish-Lithuanian Rabbinate," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 17, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2011): 1-3; Adam Teller, "Rabbis Without a Function? The Polish Rabbinate and the Council of the Four Lands" in Jack Wertheimer (ed.), *Jewish Religious Leadership: Image and Reality* (New York: JTS, 2004): 371-401; and Simon Schwarzfuchs, *A Concise History of the Rabbinate* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 50-63.

<sup>4</sup> "Hamashal vehanimshal" is one of most impressive narratives in *'Ir umelo'ah*. It is not discussed at length in this study because it was treated in a separate volume. S. Y. Agnon, *The Parable and its Lesson*, translated by James S. Diamond with an introduction and critical essay by Alan Mintz (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 2013).

<sup>5</sup> See also the recent study Roman Katsman, *Literature, History, Choice: The Principle of Alternative History in Literature* (S. Y. Agnon, *The City with All That is Therein* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013): 236-290. Katzman's study is an ambitious attempt to apply the theory of alternative history to Agnon in general and to this novella in particular. His work stimulates us to reflect on the relationship between the world Agnon creates in *'Ir umelo'ah* and the historical reality of Galician Jewry. In *'Ir, mishpat, sipur* [City, Law, Story] (Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishing House, 2002), Shulamit Almog approaches the story through the lens of law and jurisprudence. She argues that Buczacz, like Zabno and all human communities that wish to live in civil accord, is faced with necessity of legal adjudication because of the imperfect nature of human nature. The search for a rabbi is motivated not only by civic pride but

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by the real need for an authority who can secure the rule of law. Almog productively calls our attention to many instances of legal procedures in the novella, almost all of which remain unresolved or whose resolutions are not reported to the reader.

<sup>6</sup> Most of the novella was published in four parts in *Haaretz* in 1960-61. The last section, which is marked by breaks in the manuscript, was not published in a periodical and appeared only when *'Ir umelo'ah* was published as a book in 1973.

<sup>7</sup> The handover is most fraught in "Hamashal vehanimshal," in which the narrator is at pains to distinguish the shamash's voice from his own. In all three cases, the monologue is contained within the discourse of the narrator, who introduces the monologue and returns at its conclusion.

<sup>8</sup> On this notion see the statement of R. Hiyya bar Abba in Qidushin 30b and the exegesis of Numbers 21:14.

<sup>9</sup> Almog points out, despite his flaws and inner struggles, R. Avraham manages to negotiate the dual roles of community rabbi and disinterested Torah sage. Having been taught well by his teacher, R. Mordechai rejects this path out of hand; but his purism leaves the messy matter of justice for others to take care of. Almog, following Dan Laor, proposes a real-life model for R. Mordechai in the person of R. Shmuel Byalovlovsky (sp.?), an independent rabbinic scholar Agnon admired and consulted in his rabbinic anthologies (143-46).

<sup>10</sup> On narrator's insistence on calling him Rabi Mordechai from birth out of respect for his later learning.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that the two halves of the novella are both equal in length (35 pages). (That is counting from the beginning of "What the Rabbi Saw That Made Him Flee" to p. 380, where the narrative comes back to the liberation of the rabbi from hiding and then turns toward Buczacz's decision to approach R. Mordechai.

<sup>13</sup> Reuven and Shimon, the older sons of Jacob in Genesis, are generic names commonly used in legal discussions of the sort, "If Reuven lent Shimon ten dinars, then. . . ." Not surprisingly, no last names or other monikers are given.

<sup>14</sup> Note on size of ponds.

<sup>15</sup> Note on 999.



<sup>16</sup> On key role of fish in Jewish culture/Kabbalah and description of what usually has to be put up with.

<sup>17</sup> Prince Popiel II (or Duke Popiel) was a legendary 9th century ruler of the West Slavic (proto-Polish) tribe of Goplans and Polans, the last member of the pre-Piast dynasty. The Piast dynasty was the first historical ruling dynasty of Poland. The first documented Polish monarch was Prince Mieszko I (c. 930–992). The Piasts' royal rule in Poland ended in 1370 with the death of king Casimir III the Great.

<sup>18</sup> The conspicuousness of the biblical allusion draws attention to the fact that God as an actor or a presence is not mentioned throughout the Reuven and Shimon story. Nature is left to act on its own, and the flood becomes a cosmic judgment on the affairs of men.

<sup>19</sup> Shimon consistently uses his religious knowledge as an instrument of realpolitik. He learns mishnayot for the repose of the first husband's soul in order to appropriate his privileges in the mind of the Duke, and he performs a strange kabbalistic ceremony called *tiqun almanah*, which he adapts for his own good rather his wife's (374-5).

<sup>20</sup> It is not clear whether this figure is the Polish magnate who owns the city, or his administrator, or whether this is the Austrian official who now administers the city as a provincial appointment.

Earlier in the story, at the point when Mordechai's father set up his jnn, it was made clear that the Austrians had taken control. But Agnon leaves the historical situation fuzzy, perhaps to suggest, at least in this context, the generic nature of gentile rule.

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<sup>21</sup> The language describing his reaction is much more colorful: *nitkarkemu panav shel R. Mordechai venehepkhu keshulei qedeirah* (His face turned green-yellow with consternation and black like the inside of a pot). The idiom are based on Bereishit Rabba 20 and Shabbat 30a, respectively.

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