uNOTES BEGIN ON P 22 (see previous file with notes on "Until Eliyahu")

CHAPTER EIGHT

REDEMPTION

BUCZACZ LOST?

Is there any good news to relieve the utter bleakness of "Disappeared"? Can any image dispel the grotesque horror of the catatonic tailor's apprentice-turned-soldier being returned by the police to Buczacz in his blue dress? As described in this major story, the world of Buczacz is bereft of human feeling and communal responsibility. The benign oppression exerted by the distant Austrian regime engenders a base and unworthy response, which in turn reveals a Jewish community that has become wholly unmoored from its connection to Torah. The community's rabbi, an admirable man and estimable scholar, is relegated to the margins of communal life, which is dominated by callous and smug men whose only recommendation is their wealth. The victimization of the innocent unfolds with tragic inevitability.

This picture of a fallen Buczacz poses a threat to the integrity of *A City in its Fullness* as an undertaking. From the outset, to be sure, Agnon rejected nostalgic idealization as a premise for his grand project, and he took the notion of "fullness" in his title to be understood not as fulfillment or consummation but as epic inclusiveness. The shortcomings of individuals and the collective are indeed presented in full, but they are always located in their relationship to the norms of learning and worship, whose privileged status is never far from our awareness. The fullness to which Agnon is committed, we have seen, takes on a different coloration in the stories set before and after the Partitions.

During Polish rule, that fullness, though variegated, is richer with admirable if flawed men. The rabbis, hazzanim, the lay scholars (lomedim), and the community heads (gabbaim), as well as the humble shamashim and tradesmen, who populate these pages are complex figures whose holiness does not obscure their humanity. As a collective entity, Buczacz itself is a character playing a recurring role. At times the Holy Community of Buczacz is prideful about

the preeminence that its learning should—and fails—to entitle it to, and at other times the community is portrayed as a slothful enclave given to recirculating rumor and truckling to the well-healed. But Buczacz is also a town that is capable of pulling itself together and returning to its professed values.

A key text in this regard is "The Parable and its Lesson." The aged shamash, who is brought before a court on charges on humiliating the son-in-law of the town's wealthiest man, tells the story of his journey to Gehinnom fifty-four years earlier in the company of the saintly R. Moshe. The picture that emerges of this earlier period, a time when Buczacz was a fragile band of survivors in the throes of recovering from the 1648 massacres, is of a community united in reverence for its magisterial spiritual leader and obeisant to his will. In the present of the story, however, a recovered Buczacz has become complacent, and the force God's word, as read aloud in the synagogue on Sabbath mornings, has been blunted and obscured beneath a mesh of protocols based on social status. At the same time, Buczacz is a community capable of *teshuvah,* return to the right path. The shamash's story, with its gruesome images of the consequences of competing with God's word, shocks the community into reexamining its ways and recommitting itself to valuing Torah over wealth.

In the stories that take place after the Partitions of Poland, that capacity for inner reform seems exhausted. Earlier in *A City in its Fullness*, Agnon's narrator never ceases pointing out that the Jews always have a hand in their own troubles; and at the same time, he does not let us forget the capricious cruelty of the Polish nobles and their contempt for their Jewish subjects. But when the Austrians become the rulers of Buczacz that balance is disturbed. In "Feivush," the Yekele stories, and "Disappeared," it is the Jewish community itself that hands over to the authorities its weakest and least protected members. The Austrian overlords are represented as being more preoccupied with their procedures and policies than with harassing the Jews, although those protocols certainly have the effect of applying harsh fiscal pressures on the community. Those pressures in turn create the conditions for an inner moral corruption upon which the restraints imposed by the Torah have been neutralized. The evisceration of rabbinic authority is further accelerated by the gathering momentum of modernization ushered in by the access to German-language culture.

The very status of Buczacz as a *qehilah qedoshah*, a holy community, is imperiled by these dark late stories. The ideal of fullness, with its balance of norm and deviation, which has

structured the entire project of *A City in its Fullness,* is in danger of being polluted beyond repair. To gauge the distance fallen from the idealized image of Buczacz, it is worth recalling the motto that appears in large font following the volume's title page:

> This is the history of Buczacz that I have written in my aguish and sorrow so that the children who come after us should know that our city is a city full of Torah and wisdom, love and piety, life and grace, kindness and charity from the time of its founding until the abominable enemy and his polluted and deranged accomplices utterly destroyed it. May God avenge the blood of His servants and visit vengeance upon His enemies, and may He redeem Israel from all its foes.

Even if we make a considerable adjustment for the liturgical and martyrological function of this *cri de coeur*, there is no getting around the gap that opens up between the city full of Torah and kindness and the city that sacrifices its most vulnerable as depicted in "Disappeared."

In response to this threat, Agnon takes a path of addition rather than denial. The moral debasement of Buczacz represented in the stories from the Austrian period cannot be controverted. The honest storyteller, no matter how devoted he is to the cradle of his soul, must tell the truth. He may, however, place beside these truth-telling stories *another* story that presents a truth that acts not as a refutation but as a supplement. This is the case with the extraordinary story "In a Single Moment" [Besha'ah ahat, pp. 558-89], which together with the equally extraordinary story "Pisces" [Mazal dagim, 602-32], anchors the conclusion of *A City in its Fullness.*[1] "In a Single Moment" describes a wholly abrupt and precipitous individual act of kindness that sends ripples of joy throughout Buczacz. Although this sudden act lacks the power to brake or disrupt the forces responsible for the degeneration of community, it represents an eruption in the present moment of what was best about Buczacz in former times. It is, in every sense, a breakthrough, despite its evanescence.

Two Parts of book
Elijah- early
moment- late
Epilogue

MOMENTS OF REDEMPTION

The special status of a privileged moment has a long provenance in Jewish literature. The title "In a Single Moment" quotes the words uttered in the Talmud by Rabbi Judah the Prince upon observing the martyrdom of Rabbi Hanina at the hand of the Romans (Avodah Zarah 10b. The connection to the story will be discussed below.) In later legend, Elijah the Prophet, who did not die in the biblical account but was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot, appears in the guise of a beggar or a poor man. He is the precursor to the Messiah, but his disguise presents a challenge that exists for the duration of a moment. If true kindness is shown to him despite his loathsome state, then the world will be redeemed. But the opportunity is always lost, and, although some uplift is gained from the encounter, the state of unredemption persists. This is a key motif within Agnon's writings as a whole. In the important earlier autobiographical story "The Kerchief" (Hamitpahat, 1932), the protagonist comes across a particularly repellent beggar on his return from the synagogue on the morning he has become a bar mitzvah.[2] Rather than avert his eyes, he hands the beggar the silk kerchief his mother had tied around his neck for this special occasion. The story evokes the traditions of Elijah as the harbinger of the Messiah as they are played out in the boy's fantasies only to demythify and humanize them. In ironic contrast to the hapless characters in the legends, the boy does not miss his chance and seizes the moment. But what is triggered by the act is not a fairy-tale deliverance but the beginnings of a moral conscience, which may become the first steps taken in a process of redemption. It is the boy's arrival at a sense of responsibility for the suffering in the world that Agnon makes the reinterpreted significance of becoming a bar mitzvah.

The moment is seized or lost. If the world we live in is, by definition, unredeemed, then the Buczacz of the late stories, a city withdrawn into a hardened carapace of indifference and self-satisfaction, is doubly lost. This fallen Buczacz describes a world perilously close to the one inhabited by modern man. In conceiving of the larger parameters of *A City in its Fullness* as a project, it will be recalled, Agnon sought to halt his epic story before the march of modernity, embodied by emancipation, succeeded in finally enfeebled the capacity of the Torah to serve as a normative anchor for Jewish society. In looking ahead to that inevitability, "In a Single Moment" describes the only kind of redemption that will be possible in that desacrilized space: isolated moments of grace.

Thought of in theological terms, a moment can be more than a moment. A moment of *redemption* can be defined as a moment in which the divine axis, the axis of eternity, intersects

with the human axis, the axis of temporality. Even if the moment itself is of the briefest duration, the significance of what is revealed or unlocked overflows the limitations of the experience. In the case of "In a Single Moment," the act at the story's climax reveals the depths of Torah learning that were once intrinsic to Buczacz and have now been repressed; and at the same time it looks toward the future by participating in the process of repair upon which the Redemption will depend.

Agnon's considerable achievement in "In a Single Moment" is to give this theological moment narrative extension. The single moment in question is the decision made by Avraham David, and acceded to by his son Menahem, for the son to marry a poor bride who was supposed to be married that very day only to have the bridegroom withdraw from the marriage agreement. With the hupah erected and the bride in her wedding dress, though deeply traumatized and humiliated, one bridegroom is substituted for another on the spot. This is a momentous decision made in a moment; an instantaneous, headlong leap with lifelong consequences. Yet "In a Single Moment" is a lengthy story because a carefully constructed set of background circumstances and cultural explanations has to be put in place so that, when it finally comes, the great, astonishing act will burst with significance. To this end—or rather fruitfully to delay a too-soon arrival at this end--Agnon makes maximum use of his narrator's characteristic penchant for digressive asides; for, with each dilatory excursus on Buczacz affairs past and present, the plot truly thickens so that when the explosive moment finally comes we can adequately register how much is disrupted and how much is invoked.

"In a Single Moment" will stand at the center of this concluding chapter. It will be preceded by a discussion of "Until Elijah Comes," a story from an early section of *A City in its Fullness*, which uses the Elijah legends to explore the relationship between redemption as a human process and Redemption as an eschatological concept. The story is also an argument for Buczacz's suitability as a community that possesses a special link to the footsteps of the Redeemer. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the story "Pisces" in bringing the fictional arc of volume to a close by isolating the act of making art from the representation of Buczacz as a whole.

The significance of the figure Elijah in Jewish legend lies precisely in its constituting a point of intersection between this world and the next. The fact that he did not die in the biblical account made Elijah available to be considered the author of a long list of beneficent

interventions that continued to grow in the early modern period. Agnon uses this expanding inventory to comic effect in "In Search of a Rabbi," when R. Avraham tries to dissuade his congregants from presuming that his frequent midnight visitor--in reality R. Mordechai--is Elijah himself, who has come to study with the rabbi in acknowledgement of his exalted spiritual status. The rabbi provides his followers with a huge list of exhausting miraculous acts of charity that keep Elijah so occupied that it is inconceivable that he would have the time to spend long nights of study with a provincial rabbi.[3] The popularity of Elijah is attested to by the wide variety of legends about him, both oral and written, that circulated in Eastern Europe.[4] Common to most all these variants is the fact that Elijah appears in the form of a pauper or a beggar, and his disguise poses a test that reveals the presence or absence of true righteousness in those come upon him in his decrepit guise. The poor childless couple who share with the beggar the little they have, for example, are rewarded with the birth of a child, while the bumptious merchant realizes that his condescension to the beggar has caused the Redemption to tarry. In both cases the recognition of Elijah's true identity comes belatedly, in the aftermath of his disappearance. It is a moment, and one that has been either seized or lost.

Because Elijah was such an indelible part of the folk imagination of East European Jewry, it would be difficult to think of Agnon presuming to conjure up Buczacz as an archetypal community *without* including him. The real question is how Elijah will be connected to Buczacz specifically and how Agnon will put a distinct stamp upon a topos that has already been so widely elaborated and disseminated. In answer to the first question, it is worth recalling the guided tour of Buczacz described in Chapter Two. The narrator's commitment to introducing the reader to the details of the town's geography and it key institutions leads him to focus especially on the peculiarities of Buczacz. One such peculiarity is a trunk that has rested undisturbed for generations in the passageway between the old beit midrash and the new one, and it is this unexplained object, in addition to Elijah's chair used in circumcision ceremonies, that becomes the stimulus for the story at hand. The fact that the story's protagonist is a shamash binds it in an additional way to the business of Book One of *A City in its Fullness*: presenting and explaining the *kelei qodesh* of Buczacz, the various occupations and roles in the religious life of the town (rabbi, hazzan, gabbai, shamash).

What Agnon does to make the Elijah topos his own is paradigmatic of the movement of his imagination in *A City in its Fullness* as whole. In the corpus of legends about Elijah,

The steps it takes

characters are generally described in terms of their occupation and social status and the clear-cut emotions that move them such as piety, hunger, joy, and regret. The poor are most often pious and the rich overweening. It is a world inhabited by stock figures who are types rather than differentiated characters. Agnon takes the conventions of traditional literature and, without disturbing their familiar lineaments, infuses them with the psychological realism of modern writing. In a traditional rendering, the kind of shamash who is the centerpiece of "Until Elijah Comes" might be only hardheaded, unctuous, irascible, and susceptible to temptation. He inhabits those qualities in Agnon's telling as well, but he is provided with interiority and subjectivity, and this makes all the difference. The fixed humors that seem a function of his difficult occupation become unfixed when the psychological mechanism behind them is explored by a narrator who, though not without judgments, makes his chief duty to explain and understand. The unexpected development in "Until Elijah Comes" is the opening of the shamash's heart to feelings of longing and attachment. Within the logic of the story this changes comes about because of his encounter with Elijah in the guise of a destitute vagrant. But at an antecedent level of the telling, what enables this shift is the narrator's capacity to confer subjectivity upon his character by the empathic opening of an interior space.

THE CURSES

The premise of "Until Elijah Comes" is simple and effective. Two sections of the Torah (Lev. 26:14–43 and Deut. 28:15–68) contain lists of horrendous punishments that will befall Israel if the covenant with God is disobeyed; these passages are called the Tokheihah or the Curses. The second of these is read on Sabbath morning in the synagogue in the late summer as part of the weekly portion Ki Tavo. Even though the Curses belong to the past of ancient Israel, the ferocity of the language engendered a sense of fearfulness within popular piety, and the man who was called up to the Torah for that section was held to be exposed to this negative potentiality. When hiring a shamash, the narrator explains at the outset of the story, it was customary to make it an explicit condition that the shamash be that man and take this exposure upon himself unless he can find someone to replace him. Because the shamash is as disinclined as other members of

the congregation to put himself in the way of evil forces, he looks for a poor man who, for payment, will stand in his place. This has worked for the shamash in the past, but when we meet him at the opening of the story, it is already Thursday and no candidate has materialized. What's worse is that the shamash has recently been guilty of acts of dereliction and misappropriation, and although his actions have not been discovered by the community, he feels acutely vulnerable to divine judgment, and this redoubles his motivation to avoid exposure to the Curses.

In describing the orbit of the shamash's duties, the story opens up territory not previously explored in *A City in its Fullness*. It is the religious and communal leadership of Buczacz that the narrator hitherto foregrounded. The shamash, however, holds sway over a kind of subterranean religious world which, despite taking place in the same synagogues and study houses, is far removed from the circles of scholars, hazzanim and pious merchants. The gap is most evident when it comes to caring for the souls of the departed. Early death was a fact of life in this society, and it was believed by rich and poor alike that the souls of the dead underwent a postmortem journey, whose outcome depended in part on the deceased's righteousness while alive and in part on the efforts made on their behalf by surviving relatives after their passing. Those efforts include reciting the mourner's Kaddish, studying chapters of Mishnah and giving charity; without these interventions, the soul of the departed was certain to be condemned to the torments of the grave (*hibutei haqever)*. Successfully carrying out these measures, however, depends upon two things the poor lack: textual literacy and money. Gender is an added aggravating circumstance; women must rely on men to recite Kaddish and learn Mishnah. The Mishnah looms large and takes on a new role in the pious practices surrounding the dead. Rather than being an integral element in the complex of Talmud study—the Talmud, after all, is a commentary on the earlier code—the Mishnah is broken off from this complex and made into a kind of totemic object in itself, whose very recitation (rather than study) confers benefit on the dead. The effectual power of Mishnah recitation is established by the fact that the letters in the word *mishnah* are the very same letters in the word *neshamah* (soul).

Here is where the shamash enters the picture. To supplement his meager salary, the shamash in our story, like shamashim everywhere, is available for hire by those, principally women, who themselves cannot recite Kaddish or Mishnah. He is paid to recite Kaddish on behalf of a beloved deceased parent or child where there is no male available or capable of doing so. Whereas the Kaddish cannot be customized for an individual, the Mishnah lends itself to that

practice. The shamash has put together a list of twenty-two chapters, each beginning with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and he recites them in combinations that correspond to the names of the deceased. He is not a learned Jew, but his literacy suffices for this purpose. His standing as one of the functionaries of the synagogue, as modest as it is, should be sufficient to reassure the women who contract his services that the duties paid for will be performed, even though there would ordinarily be no way to make sure.

But the shamash become derelict in his duties, and one day he is caught. The way this happens tells us a great deal about the epistemological world of the story.

> There was a certain poor woman in our city. Her husband died, bequeathing her nothing but a young son. The widow took comfort in her son. But the father pined for his son and took him. One night, the young boy appeared to his mother in a dream, sadness on his face. She said to him, What ails you, my son? Does being with father not suit you? He said to her, Things would be fine for me if only someone in the world below would say a Jewish word for the ascent of my soul. (57)[5]

The poor woman is horrified anguished, for she had sold the kerchief her late husband had given as a gift her to pay for the shamash to perform just those services that would ensure the boy's comfort in the afterlife.[6] When a surprise visit to the beit midrash finds the shamash dozing over the volume of Mishnah, the widow's "heart filled with fury, and she cursed him with all the maledictions in the Curses." When the narrator tells us that "the curses of a widow are never ineffectual," he is corroborating the shamash's dread; if he finds no substitute and is himself forced to ascend to the Torah for the reading of the Curses, the danger to him will be very real. It is essential for the reader to attend carefully to the narrator's promptings in order to comprehend the theological underpinning of the story's world. It is easy to label the shamash's dread superstitious, but in the eyes of the mostly-reliable narrator this is not the case. The world of the story is one in which a dead father can "take" his young son to mitigate his loneliness beyond the grave, from which the son can communicate with his mother through a dream. These occurrences are, in this context, entirely plausible. Now, to be sure, the turning point of the story comes when the Elijah figure demonstrates that the shamash's dread is groundless. But this

is not so much the debunking of a primitive belief as its substitution by a superior and more constructive, but no less supernatural, belief.

The widow's curses are not his only problem. During the unrelenting cold of the previous winter, the shamash had taken home some firewood that belonged to the synagogue so that his young children could have some warmth. Over Hanukah he did the same with oil that belonged to the community because there was none left at home to light the menorah for the holiday.[7] His actions have not been discovered, and may never be; but the shamash lives in a world in which sins are visible to God and in which a reckoning is certain. This is sure to be the case even if his punishment is not triggered by the reading of the Curses. He has become mired in melancholic resignation; in his mind he tries various calculations to minimize his culpability by shifting his sins into categories of lesser gravity, but he knows the game is up: "regrets broke his heart." He knows his punishment will be set in motion by his exposure to the Curses if no substitute is found. It is Thursday and the clock is ticking.

At just this moment the door to the beit midrash opens and a vagrant enters.[8] Of the many comic ironies in the story, this one is especially rich. The shamash seizes on the poor man as a candidate to be his substitute. Yet while a redemptive moment is indeed in store for the shamash, little does he know that his breakthrough from dejection to joy will come precisely because he will *not* replaced and will have to face the Torah on his own. Another irony that subtends the story as a whole derives from the fact that the shamash is ignorant of the vagrant's true identity, while the reader knows the truth from the outset. Not only the title of the story but a common familiarity with folk tales about Elijah make that knowledge taken for granted. The shamash's ignorance not only makes him a figure of comic ridicule but it also serves to underscore the differences between the two men. Taking the Elijah figure for a common itinerant pauper, the shamash projects onto him a set of assumptions he supposes to be true about the poor generally: they are moved first and foremost by their bellies, they are ignorant of Jewish learning, they faun upon the well-to-do town Jews and look down upon uncouth village Jews. He knows these things to be true because they are true of him as well. Admittedly, he is not homeless or destitute or entirely ignorant, but he most assuredly inhabits the world of poverty. He too lives on the edge, and his misappropriation of synagogue property is motivated by want. He is not far removed from the poor widows who hire him and whose trust he abuses. He is, ordinarily, an effective manager of the vagrants who collect at the synagogue precisely because

he knows them all too well. The shamash, in short, is a creature who has been wholly shaped by the conditions of deprivation within which he lives and works.

When the door swings open and the vagrant enters the beit midrash, the shamash is confronted with a radically new order of value. The dialogue between the two men stages a brilliant and, again, very funny encounter between two ways of seeing the world. Throughout the uncanny duel that unfolds, the petty privation in which shamash is immured doesn't permit him to question his superiority to the vagrant. And all the while the reader shares in the knowledge that this small-minded functionary, unwittingly, is crossing swords with Elijah the Prophet. Yet despite his heavenly pedigree, the Elijah figure uses none of the supernatural instruments that folklore has so generously assigned to him. There are no tricks or miracles. A great change in the shamash is indeed effected, but it is brought about solely through words, the emotions that accompany them and the aura they leave behind. It is essential to the dramatic structure of "Until Elijah Comes" that the shamash's transformation begins to take place only *after* the vagrant has gone off to a neighboring village. During the exchange with the shamash in the beit midrash, the latter gives no sign that he has absorbed one wit of the alternate view of the world that has been put before him. It is only later that we understands that all the while the vagrant's affect and utterances have been performing a kind of therapeutic intervention on the soul of the shamash.

Things get worse before they get better. The genial and optimistic nature of the vagrant's spirit serves only to provoke the shamash into to revealing how mean and impoverished his spirit has become. The minute the vagrant walks in the door he brazenly taps the shamash on the shoulder and confronts him:

> Why, my beloved Jew, are you distressed? We are Jews, blessed be God, and it is good for a Jew to be happy at all seasons, having merited to be a Jew. But you, my beloved Jew, show a darkened countenance. God forbid that you have forgotten that you are a Jew!
>
> The shamash looked angrily at the vagrant. He wanted to grab him by the neck and throw him bodily out of the beit midrash. But his heart said to him, Slow down; sometimes, deliverance can come from a person such as this.

The shamash made his angry face vanish and stretched out his right hand to greet him, as one greets a guest. (59)

The shamash's distress is real, even if it is of his own making; and it is hardly unnatural for someone in this state to react with rage when told, with no preliminaries and by a vagrant no less, to be happy just because he is a Jew. What the reader knows that the shamash does not is that the beggar who addresses him is *not* natural and his seemingly-glib wisdom is not shaped by human experience. His ability to address the other as *yehudi ahuvi* (my beloved Jew) is not an affectation, nor is his conviction that the very fact of being a Jew must necessarily confer a profound sense of joy. Not only is the shamash incapable of assimilating the "good news" the vagrant announces, but he mobilizes himself to undertake a plan of expedient insincerity in dealing with him. He counsels himself to suppress his rage and keep his mind on the prize. When he encourages himself by saying that "sometimes deliverance can come from a person such as this," we cannot help being amused because we know that announcing the deliverance in the grand sense of the Redemption is exactly Elijah's line of work.

Yet by embarking on his tactic of ingratiation, the shamash digs himself into a deeper hole. Each time he offers the vagrant some blandishment, not only is it rejected as unnecessary, but the shamash ends up revealing his own obsessive preoccupation with status and wealth. For example, when he attempts to flatter the vagrant by bidding him sit down on the bench reserved for the well-to-do, he cannot help rattling on about "those who have means, the esteemed rich, who have hundreds of gold coins hidden in their cellar cupboards. You and I, my friend, would be happy if we only had as many pickled cucumbers!" (59). When the vagrant declines the shamash's offer of food and money--he has no need for money and he has brought his own food with him--he does so not out of self-denial but self-sufficiency. The vagrant's answers serve only to mystify, confuse and frustrate the shamash because his own deprivation makes it impossible for him to imagine a life lived outside the vicious circle of want and envy.

The sharpest contest concerns the reading of the Curses. The first thing the vagrant does upon entering the beit midrash is to remark upon the shamash's visible distress. In return, the shamash simply describes his predicament. Although he does not reveal the exigent sources of his anxiety, he admits that if he does not find a replacement, he will have to ascend to the Torah

for the reading of the Curses. In his eyes, the reason why this should be avoided is self-explanatory and taken for granted by any sensible person. For the vagrant it is quite otherwise.

> The vagrant fixed him in his gaze and said, My beloved Jew, what nonsense are you speaking? Can there be a Jew who is distressed to be given the honor of blessing the Torah? Everyone who merits such an honor should be glad and, what's more, give charity. But you, my beloved Jew, are afraid lest you be called up to bless the Torah? Do not think ill of me if I tell you I am not such a fool as to believe that? If your beard and your side-locks did not testify that you are a man of standing, I might think you a professional jester. (59)

It's worth recalling that it was the heads of the congregations who made the matter of the Curses a provision in the shamash's contract in the first place. The discomfort surrounding the reading of the Curses was an accepted tenet of popular belief rather than a bauble of superstition. Yet what is axiomatic in the popular mind—and in the shamash's--in one direction, is equally axiomatic in the vagrant's mind in the opposite direction. There is no meeting place between the two positions. For the vagrant, the fear is so far beyond the borne as to be tenable only by fools or jesters.

One of the cruxes in interpreting "Until Elijah Comes" is how the shamash's encounter with the vagrant brings about his later transformation. During the exchange between them in the beit midrash, not only does the shamash remain insensible to the vagrant's alternative perspective but he contorts himself into ever more unctuous displays of dissimulation. The answer, I think, lies in aspects of the vagrant's manner not directly connected to the content of what is said. In the first words of the passage above, the Hebrew reads *heqifo hahelekh leshamash be'einav*, which can be rendered more literally "The vagrant encompassed the shamash with his eyes." The vagrant is taking the shamash in, comprehending him, and orienting himself toward him. He is making his presence available to him and in alignment with him. Furthermore, the epithet he uses to address the shamash, "my beloved Jew" (*yehudi ahuvi*), is something more than a pietistic appellation. It is an affirmation of an unconditional core of worthiness the shamash possesses despite the distasteful behaviors of his on display. It is this

mode of relatedness and the aura of presence that attaches to a deeper part of the shamash's self and does its work during the vagrant's absence over the next several days.

The remainder of the exchange between the two men takes places under the sign of another fraught Hebrew verb. Chapter Four, which describes the shamash's efforts to cajole the vagrant into taking his place at the reading of the Curses, opens thus: "The shamash began to play the innocent with the vagrant" (*hithil metamem 'im vahelekh,* 60). *Metamem* means to play the role of an innocent or a rube (*tam*) for ulterior purposes. *Tam* partakes in some of the same duality possessed by the term "innocent." A *tam* can be either a person of unblemished purity or a simpleton. The two men play out these roles in amusing ways. The one who thinks he is running the show turns out to be clueless, while the one who seems to be witless and naïve is the embodiment of profound faith. The encounter comes to a comic crescendo—at least from the reader's privileged vantage point—when the vagrant finally takes his leave to attend a circumcision ceremony in a neighboring village. He has tried several times unsuccessfully to interrupt the shamash's nonstop flow of prying questions and fawning inducements. When he begs leave to set off for the village, the shamash, in a campaign to keep him tethered close to home, launches into a diatribe denigrating village life and the paltriness of their fare when compared with the glories of a city like Buczacz and its famed comestibles. He punctuates his argument with the declaration that even Elijah, who is supposed to attend all circumcisions, wouldn't be caught dead there. All the vagrant can do in response is to smile and keep silent, and so do we.

There is Redemption and there is redemption. Redemption means breaking the yoke of the Nations and the delivering the Jews from exile; redemption, in the lower-case mode, describes this-worldly shifts in the character of individuals and society that, concerted and amplified, contribute to the possibility of a transcendent deliverance. The title of Agnon's story, "Until Elijah Comes," plays on this difference. Elijah is the precursor of the Redemption, but *until* Elijah comes, in the duration of exilic reality in which our lives take place, we are sometimes given the opportunity to experience moments of transformation. Agnon's story gently mocks the grandiose expectations surrounding the Elijah figure in Jewish folklore, whose mainstay is the premise of "if only. . . ." If only the shamash had realized the vagrant was Elijah, then surely the Redemption would have come! Agnon points us instead to the transformative

impact of the Elijah figure on the here-and-now in the form of a shift in the being of a miserable synagogue functionary.[9]

The dramatization of that shift is the business of the second half of the story. Redemption can be experienced as an epiphany, a sudden moment of breakthrough, or it can be experienced as a gradual process that spreads and takes root. These two possibilities correspond to the two stages of the shamash's change in this second half. In the first, the shamash is faced with coping with the vagrant's absence. He has left Buczacz but promised to return for the Sabbath, and the shamash has interpreted his assurance as agreement to stand up for him when the Curses are read in the synagogue.

The test to which the shamash is put begins when the vagrant fails to appear in the synagogue at sundown on Friday, and continues the next morning when the service has already advanced to the removal of the Torah scroll from the ark and the commencement of the reading and there is still no vagrant in sight. As the narrator admits us to the shamash's inner thoughts during this interval, we see a man who is trying to overmaster his feelings of panic and not succumb to despair.[10] At the same time he is experiencing feelings new to him. "In all his days, he had never so yearned for a person as on that night; in all his days, he had never been as angry with a person as on that night" (63). When the vagrant suddenly and mysteriously appears by the door of the synagogue, the shamash is still undergoing an ordeal of faith that takes him through several steps of moral and theological reasoning. He recognizes in the vagrant's face the qualities of integrity and innocence (*temimut*), and he recalls the Torah's injunction concerning the payment of vows ("The words of your mouth you must honor," Deut. 23:24), and he assures himself that if there is anyone who will keep his promises it is this man. The shamash then makes a leap to another level of understanding: "In this way, a person's faithfulness grows stronger, seeing that other people rely on him to stand by his word. And just as Israel behaves here below, so it is done for them in the world above; all the promises that have been made to us will be fulfilled." In his own way, he has done nothing less than intuit the relationship between redemption and Redemption.

But there are no easy steps for our shamash, and, again, the joke is on him. As he spurs himself on to keep the faith, what he is trusting in all the while is the prospect of his being shielded from exposure to the Curses. The vagrant's appearance in the eleventh hour justifies his faith. With calm triumph he descends the dais into the congregation to call the vagrant up to the

Torah. The weekly portion is divided in to seven aliyot (ascents), and the section with the Curses is the sixth. With gracious formality the shamash goes through the etiquette of obtaining the vagrant's full Hebrew name and offering him the honor of the sixth aliyah. With equal graciousness, the vagrant responds that nothing would have given him greater pleasure if the honor had been offered earlier. But because he is a kohen, a priest, and kohanim are called to the Torah only for the first aliyah, it is too late for him to accept. There is nothing for it; the congregation is already grumbling over the delay. The shamash must himself take the aliyah and face the consequences.

This is when the breakthrough takes place. What begins in buffo comedy when the balloon of the shamash's expectations is pricked ends in an unexpected moment of an entirely different sort. The vagrant turns his encompassing and loving gaze upon the shamash, addresses him as "my beloved Jew," and urges him to remove anger from his heart and recall that all the sections of the Torah are holy. The anger drains from him and is replaced by love, which in turn makes room for joy. The joy become infectious: "From the power of his joy, the whole beit midrash was filled with joy, and from the joy of the congregation, the joy of Yoel Yonah was multiplied. This is the power of transcendent joy—joy that brings joy that brings more joy" (65).

Yoel Yonah. Did we know that the shamash had a name? For the first half of the story we did not. Ordinary narratorial practice would have assigned him a proper name at the outset. But the name is conspicuously withheld, and, when we first meet him, the crabbed and crafty soul of the shamash seems wholly coterminous with the occupations he performs on behalf of the synagogue as well as with the private employments he takes on to make ends meet. Because there is no space between function and identity, there is no need for a proper name. But now, as that space is widened and an inner life emerges, the shamash becomes known to us a Yoel Yonah.

What follows the moment of joyful exhilaration? After ascending to the Torah and the beatitude he experiences there, Yoel Yonah must now descend into the flow of life and attempt to hold onto the power of the event. In the shamash's mind, that power is directly connected to the vagrant, and at the conclusion of the service the shamash looks for him to invite him home for the midday Sabbath meal. But he is nowhere to be found, and that remains the case at the Minhah service later in the day. In his persisting absence, the shamash must come to terms with how his life has change and how that change can be sustained. It is during this penultimate

section of the story that the narrator allows us to eavesdrop on the rationalizations, mood swings, and self-assurances animating the shamash's newly active inner life. There is perhaps no better example in the whole of *A City in its Fullness* of Agnon's modernist-realist way with stories set in traditional life. This is not to say that a figure such as the shamash could not have these thoughts and feelings at this time and in this place; far from it. But it is only through Agnon's imagining this inner life and giving it articulation through the techniques of modern literary representation that it can, belatedly and retrospectively, come into being.

At home with his wife, Yoel Yonah remains flush from his spiritual reversal of fortune, despite the vagrant's absence at their table. He sooths his disappointment by repeating to himself the counsel the vagrant had urged on him in the face of his anger earlier in the morning: "Do not bring distress to your Sabbath rest, my beloved Jew" (65). To his wife he declares aloud, "A vagabond visitor has arrived and transformed my spirit," and he goes on to rue the years of unnecessary vexation and anxiety he put himself through in avoiding being called up to the Torah for the Curses. To himself he silently tries to sort out the transformation that has overcome him.

> Yoel Yonah sat in wonderment. 'A vagrant, possessed only of his poverty, yet my heart is drawn to him. And even if it is in human nature to sometimes yearn for one another, we don't know the cause of such yearning. If it is because of the man himself, why did I not yearn for him earlier? Now that I know him, I see that the change resides in me, not in him. If this is so, why did it happen now and not earlier? In any case, it makes no sense to waste time in such musings when Sabbath delicacies lie before you.'

The wonderment comes from several sources. Yearnings for another human being are a new experience for the shamash, whose world has until now been shaped by the scramble for survival and the sizing up of others in terms of their utility to the pursuit of that goal. Even if he can imagine the existence of such yearnings, his status-bound view of the world can scarcely accommodate the notion that a destitute pauper could elicit those feelings. Because the yearnings are new to him and because he knows that the vagrant has not changed, he works through to the conclusion that it must be he who has done the changing. This turns out to be a

line of inquiry too disruptive and perplexing to pursue, and Yoel Yonah, a man perpetually hungry, breaks off his ruminations and turns to the dishes before him.

The pivot to food is far from a trivial move. The shamash thinks and dreams about food, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that it is the system of signification through which he sees the world. He is far from being a glutton after the manner of the well-to-do Fishel Karp, the corpulent hero of the story "Pisces." Yoel Yonah comes by his preoccupation with food honestly: he is poor and perpetually hungry. He is not destitute, however. The conditions of his subsistence are such that his family gets by with meager fare during the week and enjoys a modest satiety on the Sabbath. So when he considers how to extend his contact with the vagrant, it is only natural that he should think of inviting him to his home for a Sabbath meal. It is the only reciprocation he can imagine. The vagrant's disappearance, alas, makes this plan impossible; and as each meal goes by, and the lost opportunity it represents, the shamash clings more and more to a fantasy in which the poor man is a guest at his table eating his wife's dishes. It is a fantasy of donation; the shamash imagines himself in possession of something that the vagrant should naturally be grateful to be given. He thinks, not unreasonably, that as a poor man himself he is in a better position to make his hospitality truly satisfying to the vagrant. If he were a guest at the table of a rich man, the vagrant would end up consuming little because his host, accustomed to rich dishes on a daily basis, would moderate himself because of the presence of a poor man. At the shamash's table, by contrast, there would be no such inhibitions, and the vagrant could partake to his heart's content.

That the language of food is the language of love for the shamash is demonstrated in his changed attitude toward his wife, Brachah Gitl. We already know about his yearnings for the vagrant; evidence for the fact that the change in him is real and not restricted to this one channel of desire comes from the ready praise he offers Brachah Gitl's cooking. Although we have not been shown the husband and wife together at home previously, the generosity of spirit that Yoel Yonah shows toward her culinary handiwork during the midday meal feels new and unprecedented. As he lies down for his afternoon nap, he marvels with sincere appreciation at his wife's capacity to "transform a pile of bones into a meaty dish" (66), and as he falls asleep, the "Master of Dreams" takes over and transforms Brachah Gitl's modest dish into "a royal banquet. A bone that did not hold even an olive-size morsel of meat became roasted doves. Yoel Yonah licked his lips as he murmured, Doves, doves." Yoel Yonah is then awakened by the

sound of doves outside his window. Because *yonah* is the Hebrew word for dove, the dreamer first disappears into the culinary consummation his unconscious wishes have conjured up and then is roused to reality by a live version of the same creatures.[11]

The failure of the vagrant to appear at either the afternoon or evening service presents a challenge to the durability of the shamash's change. He repeats to himself the vagrant's exhortation about not allowing his Sabbath to be ruined, but what was said to him with such joyous conviction he can now recirculate to himself only half-heartedly. He faces the prospect that the vagrant may indeed be an *oreah poreah*, a familiar pair of rhyming words that designate a visitor who is here today and gone tomorrow. The man who had elicited feelings of attachment the shamash had never before experienced now seems likely to disappear. What comes next gives evidence of a genuine change in the shamash, even if it is not the momentous transformation he thought it was. Rather than giving way to despair or denying his feelings, he tries to reconcile himself to the loss he is experiencing and he begins to mourn. When he returns home at the conclusion of the Sabbath and recites the Havdalah prayers, the narrator reminds us that Yoel Yonah remains clueless as to the vagrant's true identity: "Even when he mentioned Elijah, whom all Israel mentions joyously, with longing and with the hope that he will come quickly with Messiah, son of David, his voice did not change in the slightest because of his heart's sorrow that the vagrant had not returned" (68). Yet whereas this disjunction was used to prod us to laugh at the shamash in the first part of the story, here we are urged to respond with empathy rather than ridicule.

The shamash rises very early the next morning and reenters his workaday world, which is the world of ritualized bereavement and commodified memorialization. He presides over the many recitations of the Kaddish by orphans and men marking the anniversary of a parent's death; he himself joins the chorus because he has hired himself out to a number of widows to recite the memorial prayer for their departed husbands. He devotes himself to making sure the memorial lamps have enough oil lest one burns out when the congregant who paid for it happens by the synagogue. "The world is filled with complaint. No matter how careful you are, you still may not have fulfilled your duty" (68). The shamash performs his duties with industry and responsibility, and if he has not been turned into a cheerful and selfless servant, he has certainly extricated himself from the shirking and evasion in which he was mired at the outset of the story. When there is a lull in his work, his mind returns to the vagrant, and he wonders over the

anomaly he presents to someone like himself whose occupational expertise lies in taking the measure of the itinerant poor. Resigned to the vagrant's disappearance, he is drawn to inspect the chest he has left behind.

The term used for the vagrant's chest, *teivah*, is the same one used for the ark in the synagogue that contains the Torah scrolls. This was the central term used in the three stories about hazzanim in Chapter Four, where the teivah was represented as a source of dangerous holiness for those whose calling regularly drew them close to it. In a more quotidian context, the teivah appears in our story a paragraph earlier as the place around which gather all those who recited Kaddish. The vagrant's teivah is only a rude box, but the name itself augments its mystery, and it is no wonder that the shamash is drawn to see what it inside. If the vagrant is a homeless wanderer who possesses nothing but his own poverty, what, after all, can he be leaving in this receptacle?

When the shamash is about to open the lid, the vagrant suddenly materializes. The shamash notices that the vagrant no longer has his shoes hanging by their straps from his arms, and, still clueless, he feels sorry for him, imagining that they were either pawned for food or taken by force. In fact, the narrator informs the reader, the shoes were given to a pauper who needed them more than the vagrant. Yoel Yonah "cannot contain himself" and yearns to speak with the vagrant, but he is dumbstruck. The vagrant sees that he is burning to address him and urges him, "Speak up, beloved Jew, speak up," but he is frozen until God graciously returns the faculty of speech to him. Of the many crucial subjects he could have broached when his speech is restored, the shamash seizes on the one that is seemingly the most trivial.

> Yoel Yonah said to the vagrant, You left your trunk.
> The vagrant waved to him with his right hand and said, Let it rest where it is
> The shamash replied, For how long?
> The vagrant took him in his gaze, smiled, and said to him, Until Elijah comes.
> The eyes of Yoel Yonah were opened, and he shouted, But you are Elijah!
> The vagrant smiled and vanished. (69)

And so the shamash makes the great discovery that we the readers have been privy to all along.

Botching the chance to recognize Elijah and thus to hasten the coming of the Messiah is the *pointe* of all the folktales of this familiar genre. Yet in "Until Elijah Comes" this moment is rendered anticlimactic and manifestly not the point of the story. Agnon is working in the aftermath of Y. L. Peretz and other modernist writers who use the folktale as an armature for contemporary concerns. But rather than filling up these miraculous containers with humanistic content, Agnon is advancing a perspective that, even though it is revisionary, remains theological. It turns on the distinction raised earlier between Redemption and redemption. Bungling the encounter with the disguised Elijah means missing the Big Chance, the Redemption in which the subjection of Israel to the Nations will be brought to an end. But the encounter with the Elijah, as we have seen, possesses the potential to lead to a moral reeducation that betters the world, and this takes place within the historical time in which the life of society is lived. In this non-apocalyptic view of redemption, which is aligned with one of the strong currents in normative Rabbinic theology, the Redemption will come when Israel returns to the Torah, and that great moment can be accelerated only by smaller and more local processes of redemption.

Even within the this-worldly phenomenon of redemption, there is both process and event. At the end of the story, the shamash is changed but not transformed. The experience of joy that flows from him to the congregation when he ascends to the Torah is indeed a moment of transcendent grace, but it does not last. He has to struggle through the dejection that follows in order to wrest something lesser but more durable from his encounter with the vagrant. It is this small success that counts, and it places a deposit in the account of the Redemption, which will one day be full.

The material embodiment of the deposit is the humble trunk in the passageway between the old beit midrash and the new. When the shamash queries the vagrant about the trunk, the latter says, "Let it rest where it is." The dimensions of time and space in this laconic reply are both crucial. The vagrant's words, as well as his manner altogether, express a serene and joyful conviction that the Redemption, though it may tarry, will surely come. As for the place where the trunk now rests, there is no doubt in the narrator's mind that its location in Buczacz between its old and new study houses is not accidental. At the outset of "Until the Messiah Comes" the rationale for telling the story

altogether, like so many of the stories in the first part of *A City in its Fullness*, derives from an anomaly encountered in the guided tour of the city. For centuries, an old chest has remained undisturbed between the study houses. Given the narrator's endearing and unapologetic pride in his city, is it any wonder that it is with the shofar that the Elijah took from this particular chest that the footsteps of the Messiah may one day be announced?

"IN A SINGLE MOMENT"

"Until Elijah Comes" is not set in a recognizable time period. It belongs to the days "when Buczacz was Buczacz," as the narrator frequently calls it throughout *A City in its Fullness*. Although this is not an idealized time, as evidenced by the suspect behavior of the shamash, it does unfold under the sway of rabbinic and communal authority as well as within a world of belief that would understand a visitation by the prophet Elijah as miraculous but not at all unbelievable. Very different is the world in which the story "In a Single Moment" takes place. We know what time it is. The story invokes a significant historical event: the great fire of 1865 that devastated Buczacz and caused its rabbi to leave the city for an extended period. True, there may be few of the kind of specific references to the Austrian regime so crucial to the plot of "Disappeared." But "In a Single Moment" describes a world shaped by these new historical forces, and the focus is on their impact precisely on those values that the narrator of *A City in its Fullness* holds so dear: the centrality of Torah learning, or at least the respect for it, in the lives of all the Jewish folk of Buczacz, whether artisans, householders or scholars.[12] Buczacz may be a community of modest means, but, when it comes to Torah, its star is fixed in the firmament.

Until that ceases to be true. In no other story in *A City in its Fullness* is the narrator's love for his city so palpable, and in no other story is this love confronted by evidence that is so starkly challenged. The painful reality is that boorish Jews with money are everywhere asserting themselves, the great scholarly rabbis for whom Buczacz is renowned have been marginalized, and fewer and fewer young men dedicate themselves to Torah study. What is the narrator to do with his love in the face of such evidence? He does what disappointed lovers often do: He denies the gross signs of betrayal, redoubles his belief in the worthiness of the beloved, and

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hopes for a miracle. But denial has its price. Refuting reality inevitably requires exaggerations and idealizations whose strained reasoning becomes obvious to the reader. And because the narrator is an inveterate storyteller, the digressions and stories-within-stories that he allows his characters to tell serve to undermine his defense of Buczacz and betray the depths of his anxiety.

clean

The full weight of this contradiction comes to rest on the institution of marriage, which is the overriding preoccupation of the narrator and the characters of "In a Single Moment." In the days of Buczacz's glory, "every father would marry off his sons and daughters by means of the Torah" (561), the narrator proudly generalizes; and he then proceeds to elaborate how fathers, each according to his station in life, would seek bridegrooms ~~for their daughter~~s who distinguished themselves in Torah study. The marriage system was even equipped with a safety net. If a father "was poor and lived off charity, pious women would marry off his daughters, for in every town there was a fund to assist poor brides, and not even the poorest girl would go unmarried." The narrator, however, is compelled to admit that times have changed.

> But over the generations, as people became corrupt and began to think about money, they came to attach a monetary motive to every religious act, until such acts were completely subordinated to financial considerations. There was a proliferation of matchmakers of the kind who do not think about whether a particular girl is suited to a particular boy but rather about how much money the girl's father will allocate to her and how large a fee he himself can get for his matchmaking services. (561)[13]

The phenomenon, alas, is all too familiar. The commercializing and commodifying of marriage is a conspicuous theme in the writings of the Haskalah, the Jewish enlightenment, and especially in the works of the greatest nineteenth-century Yiddish and Hebrew writer Shalom Abramovitch (Mendele Mocher Seforim). Although Agnon is writing almost a century after Abramovitch, the time of the action—the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century—is the same. Yet there is a key difference in ~~their~~ the treatment these two great writers give to this theme. Abramovitch takes the perversion of marriage as an inevitable and foregone sign of the corruption of East European Jewry as a totality. Agnon's narrator, on the other hand, while forced to acknowledge the prevailing debasement of the institution, not only refuses to admit its

inevitability but assumes a stance of active resistance, and he throws himself into a wager about the reversibility of this trend.

The wager takes the form of a suspenseful drama surrounding the matrimonial fate of a fifteen-year-old young man named Menahem. He is an astonishingly accomplished Talmud student who is devout and deeply respectful of his parents. According to the social practices of his class, a boy of Menahem's achievement should have found a match in the daughter of a wealthy man already two years earlier, at the time of his becoming a bar mitzvah. But Menahem remains unmarried, and his unmarried state is positioned to be the telling symptom of the broad crisis that threatens to be the unmaking of Buczacz as the holy community, which these stories have endeavored so intently to construct. Is it within the realm of the possible for these forces of disintegration to be confounded by a single, individual act of restitution?

By placing marriage at the center of "In a Single Moment," Agnon is invoking one of the grandest and most layered of themes in Western literature. And if the pious narrator can be fairly acquitted of familiarity with this hoary trope, *his* creator, Agnon, certainly cannot. From the comedies of Shakespeare to the novels of Jane Austin and Anthony Trollope, marriage functions as a way to bring complex works of art to closure as well as to explore the negotiations between the needs of the heart and the interests of society. Within the canon of his own works, Agnon exploited the capaciousness of the marriage there by making it central to two novels that could not be more different from each other: ~~*Hakhnasat kalah*~~ [The Bridal Canopy, 1931] and *Sipur pashut* [A Simple Story, 1935]. The former is set within the world of Galician Hasidism at the beginning of the nineteenth century and tells the story of Reb Yudl, a pious but penniless scholar who undertakes a quest to collect charitable donations for the dowries of his unwed daughters. The discovery of a hidden treasure crowns Reb Yudl's quest with success and enables the novel to conclude with a glorious wedding. The reader is aware, however, that the marriage hangs on a miracle and that its successful achievement is far less important than opportunity provided by Reb Yudl's wanderings for telling stories and stories-within-stories about traditional life in Galicia. *A Simple Story* is set in Buczacz nearly a century later, in the years before World War One, and it is written in the mode~~, that~~ of European realism. In this case, the marriage comes toward the beginning of the novel. Hershel, the only son of successful shopkeepers, is dissuaded from following a romantic attraction to a poor cousin in favor of a

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socially advantageous match. The novel traces the mental breakdown he suffers as a result of the repression of his feelings and the cure he achieves at the hands of a wise doctor that allows him to accept his role as husband and father.

Unlike *A Simple Story*, "In a Single Moment" is not concerned with the experience of marriage but only with the making of the match that initiates the union. And unlike *The ~~Marriage~~ Bridal Canopy*, the world of the story is not one in which matches are the work of Providence and executed through miraculous means. Fifty years later, in a chronological midpoint between the two novels, the Buczacz of "In a Single Moment" is still a town of believers, but it is clear that bringing off the marriage of Menahem will have to rely entirely on human agency. The biggest departure and the biggest gamble taken by Agnon lies in the choice of genre. Whether it is the marital fate of Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* or the quest of Reb Yudl on behalf of his daughters in *The ~~Marriage~~ Bridal Canopy*, there is a whole long novel to accommodate all the missteps and misapprehensions and their corrections necessary to arrive at a fortuitous union. To do this in a short story, even a relatively long short story like "In a Single Moment," means to submit the quest to a violent compression. The wished-for outcome, if it is achieved at all, has to be produced in short order; and, indeed, the action of the story takes place during the course of a single day. Agnon's gamble can therefore be summarized thus: He has placed the whole weight of the imperiled culture of Torah in Buczacz upon the making of this match, and he has created a dramatic situation in which that has to happen, literally, in a single moment.

THE NARRATOR AS HEARTSICK PATRIOT

The story is as much about the narrator as it is about Menahem and his parents. Nowhere else in the Buczacz stories does the narrator's tongue wag so garrulously and nowhere else does he wear his feelings for his town on his sleeve so openly. To be sure, all the narrative events in *A City in its Fullness* are shaped and conveyed by the narrator, but in "In a Single Moment"

this mediation is palpable in a way that makes a reckoning with it unavoidable. The reader cannot hope to get at the meaning of the plot events without first disentangling the convictions and biases through which the story is presented. The reader must therefore first learn to read the narrator and take his measure.

The opening paragraph of the story gives us a window onto his sensibility and the concerns that preoccupy him.

> In the town of Buczacz, where all fine, upstanding Buczaczers come from, there lived a certain man by the name of Avraham David. Avraham David did not stand out among his fellow townspeople. He was like all the other people of Buczacz. He would go to the beit midrash every morning and evening and say all his prayers with the congregation. And if he happened to be among the first ten men needed to make a minyan, he would be pleased with himself all day long, for however early in the morning one gets up to pray, ten others always seem to have preceded him. Like everyone, he would recite, each day, a chapter of the Mishnah, study a page of the Gemara, and read two or three chapters of Scripture. Should he come across a verse he did not understand, he would consult the commentary of Rashi, may his memory be a blessing, or those of the Metzudot, or sometimes even the Mikraot Gedolot, to see what the great scholars had to say. After completing his morning Torah study, he would turn to works of edification, such as the books of moral instruction that set a person on the right path. If he chanced upon a virtue that was within his grasp, he would embrace it and add it to his other virtues. When it came to charity, if he found a penny in his pocket, he would give it away; and if he did not find one, he would borrow one from his neighbor and contribute~~[M1]~~ it, the way his neighbor would, when necessary, borrow from him in order to contribute. (558)

Avraham David is the father of Menahem, the erstwhile bridegroom without a bride, and the narrator's purpose in this opening paragraph is to present him to us as a typical citizen of Buczacz. Yet from the very first line we become increasingly aware of a desperate rhetoric of persuasion and over-argument. It is tautological to say that "all the fine, upstanding Buczaczers" come from Buczacz. Well, of course they do. We put this down to the narrator's jejune enthusiasm for his city and his unstoppable pride in being himself a man of Buczacz. Yet at the

same time, the overstatement produced by his eagerness suggests an unconscious anxiety. There must therefore be Buczaczers who are *not* fine and upstanding. As the story unfolds and the vapors of the narrator's boosterism dissipate, the encroachment of dark forces within the city cannot be ignored.

The strain beneath the blithe confidence is evident in the insistence on typicality. Throughout the opening pages of the story, the narrator makes it his business to convince us that in their piety and good works Avraham David and his wife Sarah are wholly unremarkable and are in fact interchangeable with any of the other citizens of Buczacz. The argument for typicality is based on the fact that Avraham David is not one of the *lomedim*, the scholars who spend most of their days in the beit midrash studying at an advanced level of mastery. It is precisely because he is *only* a shopkeeper and a householder that his morning curriculum is relevant. This is what the ordinary folk of Buczacz do. They rise early for prayers and then sit down to study daily portions of the major layers of the sacred textual tradition: Scripture with medieval commentaries, Mishnah, Gemara and then works of moral instruction. All this before the workday begins. What is true of the husband is true of the wife, and the narrator makes a point of devoting equal space to Sarah's typical exemplariness. She makes sure there is sustaining, seasonal fare on her table; she does not miss saying *her* prayers when she opens the shop in the morning and adds as many Psalms as time permits; by the light of the candle at night, while her husband and son study Torah, she devotes herself to mending clothes so that all the members of the family can remain presentable without the expense or show of new garments.

Can the reader be blamed for wondering whether all this perfection can be true? Has the lily been gilded? The answer turns on the distinction between typicality and normativity. As we have seen throughout *A City in its Fullness*, Agnon, through his narrator, re-imagines Buczacz as founded upon the twin pillars of worship and study. These norms define the distinctive identity of Buczacz as a *qehilah qedoshah*, a holy community; they are principles of value that order and organize this imagined polity. Yet, as almost all the stories testify, the rule of human behavior is deviance rather than compliance. The existence of the norms is necessary to understand that these behaviors are breaches of a code and not simply expressions of human nature. Either dialectically or paradoxically—as one may view it—it is only in the deviations from the norm that Agnon finds the true and necessary fuel for storytelling. In "In a Single Moment," the narrator's rhetoric continually seeks to collapse the difference between the typical and the

normative. From reading the others stories in this volume, especially the later ones that take place after the Partition (of which this is one), we know that the lily of Buczacz has indeed been gilded. The city is no longer—if it ever was—a community wholly devoted to the consummate ideals of worship and study, and people like Avraham David and Sarah are paragons rather than representative types.

We learn soon enough that the narrator is not a liar but a lover. He is a patriot in the root sense of being a lover of his *patria*. His purpose is not to deceive but to persuade us that this shopkeeper and his wife are instantiations of the ideals of Buczacz. And in truth they are. The dissimulation lies not in the portrayal of them as good—they are very good, although not without fault—but in the claim that they represent the whole. The narrator betrays himself in two ways. The repetition of the claim engenders doubt. How many times can we be told that Avraham David is "One of us. Neither better nor worse than the rest. Cut from the Buczacz mold. A Buczaczer like all Buczaczers" (358), before we begin to wonder? The second way is more subtle. Garrulous by nature in this story as he is in others, the narrator is wont to make a series of small digressions, explanations and dilations. At first ~~flush~~blush, these seem merely signs of narrative exuberance; out of love for his subject the narrative tells us too much. Upon closer inspection, however, we can discern in each of these instances something that chips away at the idealization of Buczacz as well as alerting us to problems areas that lie ahead in the story. In the (unnecessary) explanation of Sarah's second name—her full name is Sarah Rahel—the narrator informs us that the name is a memorial tribute to a saintly Rahel who devoted herself to aiding poor brides. Besides inadvertently introducing us to a figure who will play an important role later in the story, the reference opens a small window upon the large social problem of women who cannot wed because of their poverty. In a similar vein, the narrator makes the, again, unnecessary point of informing us that Avraham David is *not*, as might naturally be assumed, named after ~~Rabbi Avraham Teomim~~Rabbi Avraham David Wahrman, the former~~current~~ rabbi of Buczacz, because he was born while that~~the~~ rabbi was still alive. ~~The very act of mentioning the issue opens the door on another discomforting theme: the marginalization of rabbinic authority. Rabbi Avraham abandoned Buczacz after the great fire, and even upon his return he has withdrawn from the affairs of the community and relinquished his power to counteract the forces of commercialization and vulgarization that have beset the town.~~

Commented [JS3]: Why is this inadvertent? It seems quite deliberate.

Commented [JS4]: You've confused 2 different figures. Wahrman (known as the Tzaddik of Buczacz) served until his death in 1840 – presumably Avraham David, father of Menachem, was born before 1840. Teomim was the Rav at time of the fire and this story – but given the correct reference in the story, your point re Teomim's absence has to be deleted here.

Precisely because the narrator is a partisan of Buczacz he is disheartened and unsettled by the fact that Menahem remains unmarried. He experiences Menahem's situation as a fundamental fissure in the ideal of Buczacz with which he is so deeply and ardently identified; and it becomes the irritant and point of departure for the story's plotline. Why a fifteen-year-old boy's unmarried state should be so troubling calls for some explanation, and if not for the narrator's contemporaneous audience then certainly for the author's modern-day audience. Unstated but taken for granted is the assumption that in traditional East European society the worth of a scholarly boy is measured in part by the proximity of his marriage to his coming of age at thirteen. The greater his achievement and promise the greater the chance that the donning of the talit, which follows upon becoming a bridegroom, will be simultaneous to the donning of tefilin, which follows upon becoming a bar mitzvah.[14] The contradiction is sharpened by the narrator's insistence on Menahem's excellence. "Even in Buczacz—a place where Torah reigned supreme, a town that produced Torah scholars renowned throughout the country, such that the great rabbis of Lemberg would all hire tutors from there for their sons, who, in turn, then became sages by virtue of the Torah scholarship of Buczacz—even in Buczacz, Menahem stood out." The boy is simply the best of the best, yet two long years have elapsed without his finding a match.

THE MARRIAGE PLOT

Who is at fault? For the narrator, there is not a shadow of a doubt that the blame lies at the feet of unscrupulous matchmakers. Yet, as we have seen before, the stridency of his insistence draws attention away from the existence of other explanations. When it comes to the making of matches, the narrator, unsurprisingly, has a clear vision of the norm that should be respected. This is the norm that once held sway: "At one time, every father would marry off his sons and daughters by means of the Torah" (561). Up and down the social scale, literacy and erudition in the study of Torah governed the principle of selection. A father sought a son-in-law as learned as his means would allow. But then, alas, is not now. The classical marriage system has been corrupted by greed. Boys of unique genius and accomplishment, rarer now than ever,

are extremely valuable commodities. It is in the interests of the matchmakers, who receive a percentage of the dowry, to inflate the expectations of the bridegroom's family, to stimulate a bidding war for the most prized boys and to make dowry size the dominant criterion of choice. Greed infects the parents as well: "So powerful is greed that even those who devote themselves to Torah study use it as a device to marry off their sons for money." Money attracts flattery, and a father and his marriageable son become vain and high-and-mighty when they begin to believe all the exaggerations made on their behalf. The narrator is so worked up by his indignation that he cannot restrain himself and can only rationalize his screed: "The commandment to be truthful applies everywhere, at all times, in all matters."

There may indeed be a great deal to decry in the practices of the time, but the narrator's fulsome moralizing camouflages factors that lie closer to home. Menahem is Avraham David and Sarah's first-born child, and, after the deaths of the children born after him, their only surviving child. Because six days a week the boy spends the entire day in the beit midrash, his mother hardly sees him, and she does her best to accept his excelling in his studies as a compensation for his absence. When Menahem marries, he will leave their home and, according to standard practice, go to live with his new in-laws. To be sure, Avraham David and Sarah are acutely disconcerted by their son's unmarried state, but it does not take a forced psychological understanding to see that they are also ambivalent, and their mixed feelings contribute, however unwittingly, to the delay. The narrator's screed draws attention away from an even more unsettling possibility. All the fault cannot be with the matchmakers. Despite their goodness and piety, Avraham David and Sarah have not been wholly impervious to the extravagant qualities attributed to their son in hopes of inflating his value on the marriage market. They have been dazzled by the prospects paraded before them; their judgment has become confused and their capacity for action neutralized. Menahem is a prize, and if their focus had been wholly single-minded, he would have long ago become a bridegroom.

The question the story poses is how the family can move beyond this impasse. For the parents and the son, separately and together, the issue of agency stands at the center. Enmeshed in the machinations of the marriage system, the parents have abdicated taking charge of moving their son to this next, most crucial stage in his life. They are stuck and don't know how to unstick themselves. When it comes to Menahem, the issue is even more acute. The boy is of course not expected to see to the arranging of his own marriage, but a definite quotient of self-

Commented [JSS]: Unstick? Maybe: rectify the situation.

awareness and self-will is expected of him. He has to be able to assent to a match in such a way that his assent means something. Yet when we first meet him, he is a cipher, a mere Talmudic automaton. He is so much a denizen of the beit midrash that his life barely exists outside it. He may indeed be a prodigy who has mastered impressive swaths of the Talmud, but the Talmud remains his only source of knowledge about the world. He embodies the kind of medieval scholasticism that sees the world as a reflection of the text. His ability to marry, the story implies, depends upon his ability to *choose* to be married rather than remaining the compliant paragon he is when we first meet him. And his ability to choose, it is further suggested, depends on his undertaking a journey beyond the beit midrash, even if it is only to return to it.

The necessary journey takes the form of a walk during which Avraham David accompanies his son from the beit midrash in the center of Buczacz across the Strypa to a Ukrainian farmstead and then back. It is the central action of the story, aside from the climatic wedding at the end, and it is in every sense a voyage of discovery. The idea for the outing is Sarah's. It has been months—since Shavuot—that Menahem has any fresh air or exercise beyond walking ~~from to and~~back and forth from the beit midrash. But it is clear that the suggestion represents something more than a mother's solicitude for her son's wellbeing. Although she would never question the value of her son's devotion to his studies, she intuitively grasps the fact that his immersion is also a kind of confinement and that the possibility of his marrying depends on the walls of the beit midrash being breached, if only for a moment. Her suggestion meets resistance from her husband at first. As a shopkeeper who is not a scholar—despite the elaborate round of morning studies with which the story opens—Avraham David deeply identifies with the old beit midrash of Buczacz and all it represents. Menahem is his proxy in this revered world, and he is reluctant to take any step that might interfere with his studies. But in the end he submits to his wife's will because of the special nature of the day.

Agnon has configured his story is such a way that the day on which the action takes place—the duration is no more than twelve hours—is both Menahem's birthday and an ancient holiday called Tu B'Av. Tu B'Av is the fifteenth day of the month Av, which falls during the late summer. During Second Temple times, it was known as *yom qorban 'eitsim*, the day of the wood offering.[15] During the year, various families throughout the Land of Israel brought lumber to contribute to the Temple. Tu B'Av was the day in which the entire people brought wood offerings. This popular festival, held in the fields surrounding Jerusalem, was the occasion for a

what is special about this day?

round of matchmaking, which is described in the mishnah that concludes the tractate of Ta'anit (4:8):

> Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: Never were there better days for Israel than the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur, for on them the maidens of Jerusalem would go out in white dresses, borrowed in order not to cause shame to those had none of their own, . . . and dance in the vineyards. And what would they say? Young man, look and observe well whom you are about to choose. Regard not beauty alone but look to a virtuous family, for *Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised* (Proverbs 31:30).

The many motifs that resonate in this brief text make it the inner spring of the story. The celebration requires leaving the city for the countryside. The practice of wearing borrowed dresses is a measure that acknowledges and attempts to mitigate class differences and the special challenge of finding matches for poor girls. Women dancing anticipates the joyous conclusion of the story. The urging of the maidens that their prospective matches attend to descent and piety (more than mere~~as well as~~ beauty and wealth) prefigures the story's climactic "single moment." The occasion for the festivity described in the mishnah is connected directly to trees, and it is under an apple tree that Menahem will experience the epiphany that enhances his humanity and makes him ready to be a bridegroom.

Within the cycle of Jewish time, the 15th of Av dispels the gloom of the 9th of Av, the solemn fast day that commemorates the destruction of the two Jerusalem temples as well as other calamities. The heat of the summer is broken and the days begin to get shorter. For Buczacz, as for all Jewish communities, the greatest change is the celebration of weddings. For the three weeks before the 9th of Av, weddings are forbidden. With the passing of the fast and the approach of the 15th of Av, there is a spurt of weddings and the instrumental music that accompanies them. By making the 15th of Av Menahem's birthday, Agnon trains a glaring light on the ironic gap between the boy's unmarried state and the jubilant expectations associated with the day and thereby ups the ante of the plot. Will this day of matches and weddings, ancient and modern, deliver on its promise of a nuptial consummation? The intersection of a significant date in the Jewish calendar, not to mention the month of Av, with a date of birth is far from

Commented [JS6]: AWK

Commented [JS7]: I think this is a stretch.

Commented [JS8]: Jewish equivalent of being born on Valentine's Day.

unfamiliar to Agnon readers. Agnon himself promulgated the fact that he was born on the 9th of Av, the day not only of the great destructions but also, according to tradition, the birth of the Messiah. The factual inaccuracy of this claim takes little away from its power as a grand act of self-mythologizing.[16] He has made young Menahem the bearer of such a twinned destiny, and the question remains whether he will succeed in delivering on the promise.

Yet it is upon the shoulders of the father that the main dramatic burden of "In a Single Moment" rests. By the end of the story, Menahem has managed to achieve just enough consciousness and agency to make his assent to his father's grand gesture meaningful. His inner voice is too inchoate to ~~be~~ warrant much articulation by the narrator. Most of the talking, and there is a great deal of it, comes from the mouth of Avraham David, and, because he possesses little self-awareness, the reader is faced with the challenge of grasping the character behind and within the abundance of vignettes, digressions, and moralistic advice he is constantly producing. So, for example, when Avraham David enters the beit midrash to take his son on the walk, he discovers that the boy is not learning new material but reviewing the tractate he has recently completed. This becomes an occasion for the father to expound on the theme that the "Torah is acquired not only by adding to one's knowledge but also by reviewing things one already knows" (564-65); he then proceeds to tell a story about an elderly scholar who completed the vast corpus of the Talmud multiple times and who turns out to be none other than Avraham David's father and Menahem's grandfather. Because the boy is *already* putting the moral of the story into practice on his own, rendering the story unnecessary, the telling of it reflects back on the needs of the teller rather than the listener. What Avraham David needs is to be important in his son's eyes and to present himself as the spokesman for the great culture of learning in which the boy has the prospects to become a real participant. The father is a fan and advocate and booster of that elite culture, in which the greatness of his beloved Buczacz is embodied in his eyes, but he himself can be neither a member nor a player. It is his anxiety for his city that pushes him to tell stories about it; it is all he can offer. Except, that is, for his son, whom he will soon make into a pure sacrificial offering.

Commented [JS9]: I find this to be cynical and not supported by the text. The relationship between the two, and their conversations, seem to me to be very authentic. That's how a learned layman father talks to a talmid chacham son. Every father wants his son's respect, but that's not why Avraham David talks to Menachem "in learning."
Also there's no evidence in story that Menachem doesn't respect his father and that the latter would need to put on a show to earn it.

Avraham David cannot rouse himself from his ambivalence on his own; it takes a prick of conscience from the textual tradition he reveres. He can't take action because, even though he is pained by the reminder of his son's unmarried state on this his birthday, he denies responsibility. When it comes to thinking about how this state of affairs has come about, he says

to himself, "The reason doesn't matter. It was something that should have been done and had not been" (564). What rouses him to approach his son is a carefully arranged concatenation of circumstances. The etiquette demands that a man take a book in hand and study for a little while before proceeding with some business he has entered the beit midrash to take care of. The volume he pulls off the shelf to satisfy this requirement is the talmudic tractate of Ta'anit. He chooses this tractate because he had been studying it before the 9th of Av, when it is the custom to circumvent the ban on eating meat during the nine days before the fast by concluding the study of a tractate, which necessitates a celebration that, in turn, trumps the prohibition. But Avraham David left off studying the tractate before the end because, as a man of feeling, it did not seem~~feel~~ right to him to have his sadness over the destruction of the Temple circumvented by a legal loophole~~mechanism~~. Now, six days after the fast, he finishes the tractate as he waits to collect his son, and, low and behold, he comes smack up against the description of the maidens of Jerusalem dancing in the vineyards on the 15th of Av and addressing potential bridegrooms with the words, "Young man, look and observe well whom you are about to choose." He puts this together with the fact that the tractate his son has been reviewing is Kiddushin, which concerns the laws of betrothal, ~~and he suddenly fathoms that he has been given a sign. His duty~~ has now come into focus. He overcomes the stasis in which he has been mired and confidently engages Menahem in the journey beyond the beit midrash.

Commented [JS10]: Even though this is the precise mission his wife has sent him for.

THE JOURNEY OUTWARD

The world outside the beit midrash for Menahem is truly a *terra incognita* full of new phenomena, and as he encounters each one we ~~gain a glimpse~~ into the way his mind works. Impressionable though he may be, his mind is not a blank slate. Epistemologically, the reality of each new experience must first be vetted through the knowledge base of the Gemara, and, if a search of his near-encyclopedic grasp of rabbinic literature fails to return a match, he feels uneasy and unmoored. So, for example, when father and son set forth from the beit midrash they immediately come upon two of the community's shamashim returning the poles and the canopy of the hupah to the synagogue. Menahem observes this and assumes that the day's weddings are

over, but his father hastens to correct him and explain that the hupah is returned the synagogue after each marriage ceremony and then brought back again for the next. The reason for this is so "that the celebrations are not clustered together, prompting Satan to say, 'Jerusalem has been destroyed, but they are still celebrating without letup!" (566). The custom reflects a sensitivity about the close proximity between the mournfulness of the 9th of Av and the gaiety of the 15th. In the midst of his explanation, Avraham David notices that Menahem has suddenly stopped walking, and when asked about it, the boy reports, "I was trying to think of a support in the Talmud for what you said, and I did not notice that I had stopped." He has not found support for the custom in question because it is not a rabbinically enacted law but a *minhag*, a practice the community has voluntarily adopted in response to a felt but unmandated need. Menahem is undoubtedly familiar with the distinction and accepts its validity, but his inability to match this experiential praxis with the body of textual theory he has mastered temporarily disrupts him and arrests his forward movement.

Note

Commented [JS11]: I don't think this is the reason for returning the Hupah, which would have been returned if 2 weddings we taking place in Adar as well (far removed from 9 Av). It's the point of אין עושין מצוות חבילות

The air of Buczacz is thick with the smells of wedding feasts being prepared and the sounds of musical instruments being tuned. Father and son can turn nowhere without being reminded of marriages and weddings. This is even the case in the friendly gossip about the sages of Buczacz that Avraham David exchanges with the shamashim in the next section of the story (565-69). Every topic in this casual conversation comes around to the phenomenon of early marriage for Talmud prodigies and indirectly confronts the father with the consequences of his inaction. One topic, which occurs to the shamash because it is two years to the day of Menahem's bar mitzvah, is the scholarly controversy that raged a generation earlier concerning the propriety of reciting a kabbalistic formula before putting on tefilin.[17] Another focuses on the early history of R. Yekele, who is performing many of the pastoral functions of R. Avraham Teomim, the rabbi of Buczacz, who has withdrawn from public life. R. Yekele served as the private tutor to the son of the distinguished rabbis of Lemberg, the Yeshu'ot Ya'akov, until the boy became a bar mitzvah. After a meandering tale, the shamash says, "Here I come to the end of the story. The day he began to don tefilin was also the day he first donned a prayer shawl, and that is not done until one marries" (568). It all comes back to the same thing. Apparently unaware of the anxiety the family is experiencing, he gently jests with Menahem concerning the beloved old hazzan, who is about to leave Buczacz and who will make an appearance toward the

end of the story. "If your father makes haste and marries you off," he tells the boy, "you can enjoy hearing the old cantor's voice again before he emigrates to the Land of Israel."

As if to deflect the spotlight from his son's situation, Avraham David asks the shamash about the identity of the couple about to be married. The answer gives Agnon the chance to prepare for the climactic ending of the story as well as to expatiate on the fallen fortunes of Buczacz. The fire that recently devastated the town and wiped out the wealth of prominent Buczacz families has made it easy for strangers to purchase real estate on the cheap. The bridegroom, a widower with children to take care of, is one of those outsiders who has prospered on the city's distress. The bride is another story altogether. She is the granddaughter of Rahel Leah, the saintly woman who busied herself with finding matches for poor brides and in whose memory Sarah was given her second name. The bride's father is from the salt of the Buczacz earth, "a God-fearing man, devoted to Torah, who lacks nothing but a bit of luck."
We are meant to understand that if his luck had been better he would not be forced to marry off his daughter to this parvenu. It is this same parvenu who, later that same day, will withdraw from the wedding and leave the bride-to-be prostrate because her father could not make good on the full dowry promised.

Commented [JS12]: Salt of the earth is a very distinct New Testament expression. Seems out of place in this context.

The journey beyond the precincts of Buczacz loosens Avraham David's tongue about his love for his city. He is very close indeed to the attitudes of the narrator both in his pride in Buczacz and in his conviction that the glory of the city rests principally on the fame of its scholars. This love and pride determines a standard against which even the venerable rabbi of Buczacz, R. Avraham Teomim, the Hesed Le'Avraham, must be held accountable. After the great fire, the rabbi allowed himself to be persuaded by a delegation from Kamenetz to leave Buczacz and accept the rabbinate there. But all the time he was there, he and his wife were homesick for Buczacz and longed to return there, which they eventually did. Their unhappiness, the story implies, was payment for abandoning Buczacz. Avraham David goes on to regale the boy with tales of other great scholars who hailed from Buczacz, but not without an undercurrent of wounded pride; for many of them, although born, raised and educated in Buczacz, were drawn to rabbinic posts in more prosperous cities and came to be known in the larger world, unfairly in his eyes, according to the cities in which they served rather than the true source of their formation.

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Although these are tales that Avraham David has told his son many times before, neither the teller nor the listener seems to tire of them. But the repeating and recycling of stories causes the narrator some embarrassment in the presence of his readers, who are not natives of his town, and he feels called upon to defend the practice. In so doing, he presents an apologia that could serve for the entire project of *A City in its Fullness*.

> The Buczaczers love nothing more than talking about Buczacz, and the essence of the town is its distinguished scholars, those who made Buczacz what it was, who made it world-famous, to the point where Buczacz even began to recognize its own worth. Consequently, do not be surprised if, when a Buczaczer mentions one of the town's great scholars, he goes on and on, saying things that everyone knows and yet is astonished to hear again. That is what makes us love beautiful things: they have a perennial appeal, and hearing about them a second and third time can be even better than the first. The first time you hear it but not all of it. When you hear it again you savor every detail. Thus, when Avraham David spoke about our Master, the distinguished Av Beit Din, he would go on and on about things we already knew, but both the

speaker and the listener felt as if they were only now hearing the real gist of it for the first time. (565)

Implied in this passage are two analogies, one very local and one very universal. Just a few pages earlier in the story, Avraham David had cited his father's achievement of completing ~~many times over~~ the study of the Talmud many times over—and specifically its first tractate Berakhot—along with his claim that true comprehension comes only with repetition. This parallel has the effect of raising the activity of re-elaborating of tales about the great masters of Buczacz to a level of high canonicity. What is true within this parochial radius is true as well in a broader cultural sphere. The narrator mounts the argument that the Buczacz stories belong to the category of beautiful things whose attractiveness increases with each repeated exposure; so rich are they in detail that new aspects are revealed—and savored—with each retelling. This is the same language concerning the surplus of meaning that is used in the discourse of European culture to describe classic works of art. Although these analogies remain implicit, they serve to elevate to an exalted status artifacts that are homely and neither classic nor canonical. Yet it is impossible not to hear a plaintive tone in his argument. The opening of the passage already confesses to a radical limitation. The delight and pleasure in the recycling of these stories works its effect principally if not exclusively on *other* Buczaczers, for whom the fascination of the subject is taken for granted. But we are not they, and our position outside this intimate circuit means that Agnon, through his narrator, is constantly faced with the challenge of engaging us and, through the repeated and mounting delights of *A City in its Fullness*, turning us into erstwhile Buczaczers.

Father and son finally arrive at the farm house of Heretzki. Avraham David deals in leather goods, and he has brought the Ruthenian farmer a bundle of roots to be used as a softening agent in the tanning of sheep skins. The narrator uses the occasion to correct the common misconception that the Jews served as the agents of the Poles in the oppression of the Ruthenians. "Being a Ruthenian," we are told, "[Heretzki] was treated by the Poles like an animal, whereas the Jews treated him like a human being and did not humiliate him gratuitously" (571). The cordial reception accorded to the Jewish shopkeeper and his son, as well as the Ruthenian's unspoken resistance to the instructions given him, paint a nuanced picture of the

relations between these two groups.[18] Yet as piquant as is this portrayal of intergroup relations, it is decidedly secondary to the main function of the visit: to accelerate Menahem's education as a human being. The boy is a textual automaton who is incapable of perceiving the world around him without the mediation of scholastic learning. Within the condensed bounds of a plot that must reach its climax within the course of one day, this outing into the countryside has to provide a significant return on the investment made in it. While his father and the farmer conduct their business, Menahem is seated on a bench in the shade of an apple tree—to protect his delicate constitution--and left to his own devices.

What happens under the apple tree is quite extraordinary. As is his wont, Menahem begins by conducting a mental review of the statements made by the Sages about apples and apple trees. But he is put off his game but the sudden assault on his senses by the aroma of the ripening late-summer fruit and the surrounding grasses and shrubs. This fragrance triggers a more powerful experience: "a profusion of sights so lovely that no description could come close to doing them justice" (572). Menahem is seeing the manifest world of creation for the first time, yet, surprisingly, there is no religious language employed in the description, nothing at all from the Psalms or the liturgy that would naturally come to the boy's mind. It is a direct encounter between his sensorium and nature, with no texts intervening. He is content to assume a stance of amazement without the need to find categories through which to make sense of his experience. And rather than feeling agitated and destabilized, he is rewarded with a feeling of peace and tranquility. The experience is vital and dynamic: "From one moment to the next, each of these, the air and the light, each dancing and setting the rest to dancing, would intertwine, pull apart, come back together, and merge, continuously yielding new and unprecedented forms of light and air." The world has suddenly grown larger for Menahem because the faculty of his senses, which has until this very moment ~~has~~ lain dormant, has not only been brought to life but given a powerful infusion of beauty. The epiphany he has been vouchsafed belongs squarely to the poetry of Wordsworth and European Romanticism, literary territory foreign to the narrator but not unfamiliar to the author. When it is time to go and the boy disengages himself, with difficulty, from the reverie, the mechanisms of rationalization return. "Such worldly pleasures as the sight of gardens and fields may not be sinful," Menahem reasons, "but they can take over

one's mind." The boy is not far wrong, and he successfully resists being taken over, but what he has undergone has left an eradicable imprint.

BUCZACZ DESOLATE

Menahem's extramural education continues on the trip back to Buczacz, which is very different from the trip out. On the way there, the minds of father and son were delightfully preoccupied with tales of the great scholars of Buczacz, and the time had sped by. The road back is much more extensive and difficult because it graphically documents the devastation wrought by the fire, as well as the deepening fissures in the moral life of the community. Because of the emphasis on worship and learning, so many of the stories in *A City in its Fullness* unfold within the communal core of the city, a space tightly bounded by the Great Synagogue, the batei midrash and the marketplace. In the second half of "In a Single Moment" this knot is undone and the city is unspooled before us, as we are taken on a journey from the periphery back to the center. Close attention, to begin with, is given to the habitations of the Ruthenians and the Jews. In the fields where the city meets the countryside, Avraham David first points out to his son the low clay hovels of the peasants, and a significant detail about their structure suggest the relationship between the two groups: "Originally, there had been no glass in the windows, only pig bladders stretched across them that admitted light. After the fire, they had found panes of glass in the town dump, which they took and put in their windows" (573). The next closer ring of settlement contains the modest homes of poor Jews. On the earthen porches of these cottages sit old men dozing~~dosing~~ off and occasionally reminiscing about the glories of Buczacz's previous rabbi, the Neta Sha'ashu'im. Closer to the center, where the fire has done the most damage, are the ruins of the more substantial homes of the well-to-do householders as well as the few mansions of the wealthy tax collectors. It is from here that Avraham David and Menahem will soon hear the outcries and mayhem emanating from synagogue courtyard.

Commented [JS13]: Father-in-law of R Avraham David Wahrman, Rav in Buczacz 1794-1814.

With Avraham David as guide, the journey into Buczacz becomes a series of lessons on the eclipse of civility and the general decline in the moral and material fortunes of the community. For a man so in love with his city, or at least with its idealized image, these are

painful admissions to make. The father points out to his son the ruins of two homes that emblematize the deterioration. The first belonged to Ya'akov Yeshoshua, who as a boy in heder had shared a bench with Avraham David. Ya'akov Yehoshua had been a quick student with a photographic mind; to the astonishment of his classmates, he could recite a page of Gemara word-for-word just after reading it. His family was poor, and one day he was brazenly humiliated on account of his poverty in the presence of his fellows, who kept quiet, by another boy, who was the grandson of the same Feivush, the wealthy collector of the candle tax, whose depravity was described in the preceding chapter. Ya'akov Yehoshua apprenticed~~articled~~ himself to a milkman and never returned to school. The second ruin belonged to Rahel Leah the Pious, the same woman that Avraham David's wife Sarah Rahel is named for. Despite that fact that Rachel Leah was blind, her home was called the House of Light because poor women with few prospects for marriage would emerge from meeting with her with radiant faces. The father tells the story of a group of irreverent young men who used to meet Saturday nights in a burn-out old synagogue and hatch plans to play practical jokes on various people in the town. Goaded on by his fellows, one prankster, who was engaged to the daughter of a wealthy family, decided to play such a joke on Rahel Leah by coming to her door and, in a girl's voice, asking for help finding a mate. He was punished by his hair's turning white overnight. His engagement was cancelled, and eventually the only mate he could find was a crippled orphan provided for him by Rahel Leah herself.

The point of these vignettes is to demonstrate the social forces that have made it so difficult for Buczacz to remain a community of kindness and learning. The miscreants in both stories are emboldened by the positions their families have acquired through wealth—in one case the unsavory business of tax collecting--and in both the insult and abuse they commit are wholly gratuitous. And lest we think that these are merely evil seeds, we are told about the silent complicity of the others around them. As Avraham David's discourse to his son on the road back to Buczacz gathers momentum, it becomes clear that the problems go deeper than the corruption and insolence of the newly moneyed classes. The earth they are treading on is strewn with the rubble and detritus from the fire, which is described with what is for Agnon unusual concreteness and materiality. It is a natural leap from these scenes of destruction to the archetypal, mythic destruction of the Jerusalem temples mourned in the liturgy of preceding week. Through Avraham David's words, the narrator builds a multivalent analogy between the

Destruction and the fire in Buczacz. Within the narrator's traditionalist mind, there is no calamity that is not a punishment; and ~~he~~ the fire is understood as retribution for social corruption and dishonor of the Torah. Yet despite this theological rationale, much remains inexplicable. As in the biblical Lamentations and the rabbinic midrash expounding it, there remain the disturbing examples of the suffering of the innocent and the righteous. Standing over the ruins of Rahel Leah's house, Avraham David sighs, "Since the day the Temple was destroyed, there has been a harsh decree that the houses of the righteous, too, shall be destroyed" (575). Observing the ruin of another house, which belonged to a man renowned for his scrupulous observance of the Sabbath, he can only opine that this righteous man must have become "entangled in his neighbors' sins."[19] He makes a feeble attempt to explain why a beit midrash they come upon was burned to the ground by pointing to the sin of levity committed by the children of the men who learned there; but his heart is with the learned and unblemished fathers, who, like the once-noble sufferers in Lamentations, now "have embraced refuse heaps."[20] "Overnight, they lost everything they had and were reduced to poverty, may God have mercy on us all" (577).

It is no coincidence that it is this discourse about destruction that is suddenly interrupted by the ear-splitting clamor originating from the synagogue courtyard. The downward cycle reaches its nadir now in Chapter 9 as the news of the rebuffed and abandoned bride is conveyed just as an upward cycle is initiated at the beginning of Chapter 10 with Avraham David's bruiting of the grand, redemptive gesture. The narrator has given away the game, and the reader knows at this point that the story is now moving unstoppably toward a joyous ending. In clock time, that consummation is very close, perhaps no more than an hour or two off, and the father's exhortations are delivered in a frantic, headlong tone, as if every minute of delay is a matter of life and death. Yet it is precisely at this point that Agnon puts a break on the story's narrative pace and introduces a series of digressions and scenes that serve to retard the narrative flow. He switches venues to the family shop and tracks Sarah's growing bewilderment as she ~~ears~~ hears the tumult from afar and wonders what to make of it. And just as she is grasping the good news and joining the celebration at the very end of ~~Chapter~~ chapter 11, the scene changes and we are brought into the home of our Master, R. Avraham Teomim, the rabbi of Buczacz, who has recently returned from his long sojourn away from Buczacz. The review of the rabbi's recent travails, the visit of R. Natanel, the veteran hazzan who is about to settle in the Holy Land, the

Commented [JS14]: bruiting ?

leisurely discussion of halahkic issues surrounding the kashrut of a new species of bird that had recently appeared in the Holy Land and was the subject of a letter from the rabbis of Safed—there is nothing about this extended scene that yields an inch to the reader's natural desire that the narrator get him to the wedding on time.

Yet do you think the narrator will own up to all this delaying and postponing? Not a bit of it! He is at his most coy in continually protesting that he is curbing his natural propensity for expansiveness and doing all in his power to move things along. Thus in describing Sarah's state of mind, he tells us, "I am leaving aside thoughts and reflections that would slow down the story in favor of recounting the events and circumstances in full detail" (584). In the midst of the discussion of the strange fowl that has appeared in skies of the Holy Land, the narrator admits, "This is not the place to dwell on such things" (586). Most playfully of all: "I could tell you a lot about the rabbi's cane, but since our Master did not like to take time for stories that have no halakhic import, I shall not take time for them either" (587). Indeed. It is as if Agnon the author has implemented a strategic decision to slow things down while his narrator refuses to take the blame. Surely we have a right to ask what game Agnon is playing at. Although Agnon is certainly not above a measure of craftiness in his relations with his readers, in the present case, I would argue, his ends are more honest. The conclusion of "In a Single Moment," as will be described shortly, is portrayed as one in which the entire community of Buczacz is seized by a special kind of joy that, in a single stroke and for a single moment, dispels the pall that has settled upon the city. Precisely because of its rarity and evanescence, this is a moment that has to be prepared for and built up to. It must accumulate meaning and substance as it forms and gathers together the various strands of narrative into a single knot. Such profound joy cannot be truly experienced without waiting and anticipation. Echoing the Song of Songs (3:5), Agnon is telling us, "Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires."

The story also has to find time to endow the grandeur of the grand gesture with the substance it deserves. The news of the scandal of the abandoned bride is reported to Avraham David and Menahem—and the reader—not directly by the narrator but haltingly by one Yonah, the nephew of one of the shamashim. His breathless and agitated account of the outrage focuses on the groom's status as an outsider to Buczacz. No native of the city would have the effrontery to shout, "I shall not go under the canopy until the entire dowry promised by the bride's father has been deposited in my hand, every last penny of it, every last cent!" (579). The issue is not

manners and civility but trust. Moshe Ta'anit, the bride's father, had indeed promised a dowry of a certain amount, but at the moment he doesn't have the money. If the bridegroom were a member of the Buczacz community, he would know without a shadow of a doubt that the debt would be made good as soon as the father was back in funds. But the bridegroom is among those outsiders who have shamefully scooped up Buczacz real estate on the cheap after the fire, and he does not recognize or participate in the covenantal bond of trust that ~~hold~~holds the community together. It is only by going outside the community and threatening him with army conscription that there is a hope of getting him to relent and return to the hupah. But this new man turns out himself to be connected to the authorities, and when he retaliates with the promise of sending the sons of those who threaten him to the army, there is a general backing off and a throwing up of the hands. He is gone for good. And in the meantime, the bride has fainted from shock and lies lifeless on the ground of the synagogue courtyard.

It is at this point, immediately after the gruesome news has been delivered, that Avraham David turns to his son and bids him replace the vanished bridegroom under the hupah. This is a stunning proposal on all counts. It comes out of the blue without a shred of deliberation or forethought. From the point of view of Menahem's life, such a marriage would have enormous consequences. In one stroke he would be confounding the machinations of all the matchmakers and giving up his only chance for the kind of wealth and support that could underwrite his career as a great scholar. For years Menahem's parents have been embroiled in dilemmas about how to manage the potentially brilliant prospects of their sole surviving child. Avraham David and Sarah have faced this challenge together; their bond is deep and their relationship collaborative. And now Avraham David proposes to take this bold and consequential step unilaterally? This contradiction is not lost on Menahem. Always the respectful child, he utters at this juncture the funniest line in the story: "Perhaps we should tell Mother?" (580).

The father's response is to blanket the son with fervent sayings about the exalted status of saving even a single life and to tell a story about a girl who died because her father ignored her pleas for a drink of water. (Menahem annoys his father by citing the source for the story in the Jerusalem Talmud and thus adding to the delay in responding to the emergency.) Operating on the basis of only one hearsay report, Avraham David presents a picture of the bride as not merely having fainted but as being near death. His compulsion to act is so precipitous and peremptory that he is willing to forego consulting his marital partner on a decision that has endlessly

Commented [JS15]: Presumably in the world of Buczacz his name would have been Taanis. (Any resonance with Tractate Taanit was prob intentional.)

preoccupied them as a couple and, further, to ignore calculating the long-term consequences for his son's life. Granting that Avraham David is a sensitive man who would sooner not see a victimized young woman continue to suffer, we are nonetheless left without an adequate explanation for his frenzied urgency.

Only by reviewing what we know about Avraham David can we make sense of his behavior. In the long, garrulous speeches the narrator has indulgently allowed Avraham David, we hear a man who is wholly identified with the fortunes of his native town and who feels powerless to prevent their degradation. The distance between the narrator and his character, we have seen, is slight. From the opening sentence of the story, Avraham David's devotion to learning and acts of kindness is presented, with no small measure of pride and triumphalism, as typical of Buczacz at its best. Avraham David himself is deeply invested in an ideal of Buczacz as city of modest economic means with an outsized and deserved reputation for producing outstanding scholars. He is also closely aligned with a now-disused conception of marital choice based on spiritual-intellectual rather than material capital. Because of the value of his son on the marriage market, he feels an unconscious sense of being complicit in the forces that are undermining the integrity of his beloved city. Rahel Leah the Pious was the exemplar of this lost order, and witnessing the ill-treatment of her great-granddaughter is more than he can bear. Rescuing the girl is tantamount to rescuing Buczacz from the threats that have beset it. A great chance has come his way, and he will not squander it no matter what.

But can he truly believe that a reversal of fortune can be achieved by a single intervention? Avraham David's inability *not* to act is fueled by another unacknowledged source: a desire to overcome his own unimportance. Between his father, who famously completed the entire Talmud eight times, and his prodigy son, who is poised to join the ranks of the great scholars, he finds himself a shopkeeper who can at most embody the ideals of the laity. The anecdotes he ~~tell~~ tells his son about the ~~renown~~renowned scholars whose formation took place in the city's institutions of learning and the long colloquy with the shamashim about the city's rabbis all breath a pronounced sense of vicariousness. Vicarious also is his one opportunity to participate in this admired world through the placement of his son in a successful (read: wealthy) marriage. Such a marriage, however, could never be a vehicle for the salvation of more than his own family. In renouncing riches and rescuing the abandoned bride, he is undertaking an act that—in his own mind and in the symbolic code of the story—will leverage an individual rescue

on behalf of the entire polity. And because it is Avraham David who initiates and orchestrates the improvised match, it is he who emerged from the margins and saves the day.

The father's coup, it hardly needs pointing out, can be realized only through the son. The triumph is diminished if it is coerced. Hence the care the story has taken, through several stages, to move Menahem from being a textual automaton to becoming a young man who has some channel of experience beyond the walls of the beit midrash. It is perforce a limited transformation; the boy has not abandoned his habit of cross-referencing life experience with citations from the Talmud; but he has learned that occurrences in the world possess their own epistemological status rather than existing solely as a reflection of learned texts. Therefore, when he gives his implicit consent to his father's proposal with his affectingly understated "Perhaps we should tell Mother," he is no longer speaking simply as an extension of his parents' will but as a moral actor himself.

To his father, the glorious and redemptive meaning of the act is revealed in a flash, but it is not so clear what it means to Menahem. In a flash too all his conventional prospects, his great expectations, will disappear. Although the mitzvah he is being enlisted to perform may indeed be spiritually exalted, its fulfillment will ineluctably require a form of (self-) sacrifice. The multivalent status of the story's climactic gesture is illuminated by the title Agnon chose for the story. "In a Single Moment" is a good equivalent for the Hebrew title "Besha'ah ahat," but it does not, understandably, toll the bell of allusion in a way that is evident to the literate Hebrew reader. When Avraham David first broaches the idea of the substitute marriage, he points directly to the text alluded to when he states, "The Talmud teaches that 'one may win a place in eternity in a single moment'" (580). He is evoking the passage in Avodah Zarah 18b (also 10b and 17a) that describes the martyrdom of R. Hanina ben Teradion during the Hadrianic persecutions at the beginning of the second century of the Common Era. As a punishment for teaching the Torah in public, Hanina was burnt alive wrapped in a Torah scroll. Wet wool was placed around his heart to extend the agony of his death. His executioner was persuaded to remove the wool and hasten the execution in exchange for a promise of eternal life, whereupon he jumped into the pyre and was consumed. At this point

Commented [JS16]: UNC

> A bat qol [a heavenly voice] exclaimed: R. Hanina b. Teradion and the Executioner have been assigned to the world to come. When Rabbi heard it he wept and said: One may acquire eternal life in a single moment, another after many years.

The narrative in the Talmud has its complexities, but its martyrological core is clear. Having been warned by his colleagues in an earlier passage to refrain from his public teaching, Hanina triggers his own death by his persistence. His is a self-sacrifice as well as a sacrifice, and one that elicits divine approval in the form of the bat qol that confirms his place in the world to come. Rabbi is R. Judah the Prince, the greatest sage of the time and the compiler of the Mishnah, and he interprets and generalizes the meaning of the divine voice. For the generality of the righteous, Rabbi concludes, it generally takes many years of meritorious deeds to secure a place in the world to come; but there does exist the possibility, exemplified by R. Hanina's martyrdom, of winning that place on the strength of a single heroic act. Over the centuries, *besha'ah ahat,* "in a single moment," came to mean ~~fame~~ a lifetime of reward acquired by a single accomplishment. And thus the contemporary Hebrew reader would likely understand the title of the story. But Avraham David's referral to the talmudic source returns us to the sacrificial origin of the term.

Two different conceptions of sacrifice are invoked in "A Single Moment." There is the sacrifice of innocence in the case of the abandoned bride. Rendered vulnerable by her poverty despite her respectable lineage, she falls victim to the cruelty and self-interest of the new moneyed class free of covenantal bonds to Buczacz. Her sacrifice is involuntary and leads to collapse and suffering. The sacrifice made by Menahem and his parents is very different. It too requires giving up something valuable, but the renunciation is voluntary, and the sacrifice is made for good purposes. It is an offering rather than a victimization; and, although it entails material loss, it leads to a personal redemption that spreads to the collective. These two notions of sacrifice realize different dimensions of the Akedah, Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. Although the Akedah is not referred to explicitly in the story, the power of this archetypal topos cannot be avoided when we are presented with a father and son walking together on a journey while the mother waits at home, clueless as to the son's impending sacrifice. In the biblical account and its rabbinic elaborations, as in this story, there is ambiguity about whether the participation of the Isaac-figure is passive or active, whether he is old enough to willing offer himself. Here too a father is tested and makes a sudden, on-the-spot decision of

Commented [JS17]: certainly "fame" (in its conventional meaning) is wrong word here.

Commented [JS18]: How is Avraham's action in Akedah a "sudden on-the-spot" decision? he is deliberate and methodical from the moment he gets the call from God.

fateful proportions. Yet despite these similarities, the reason the presence of the Akedah is muted is because the dénouement of "In a Single Moment" is caught up in joy, and that makes the story a kind of anti-Akedah, an Akedah turned on its head. There is no joy at the end of the Akedah, only relief that a human sacrifice has been avoided, and God appeased, and then the abiding sadness that ~~Rivka~~ Sarah does not survive the trauma.

Commented [JS19]: I think you overstate the Akeda parallels here, but ignore the one key piece of textual evidence to make the case: the bpys' parents' names are Avraham and Sara!

Joy, *simhah*, is the keynote of the story's conclusion. The narrator of "In a Single Moment" joins the narrator of "Until Elijah Comes" ~~is~~ in asserting that the joy that is unleashed by the performance of a righteous act has special infectious and self-propagating properties. When the shamash steps up to accept the aliyah of the Curses, a wave of joy seizes the entire synagogue. A similar phenomenon is described in "In a Single Moment" but on a grander, more sustained and even more insistent level. News of the blessed marriage spreads with lightning speed throughout Buczacz and triggers an eruption of dancing on the part of the town's women. Sarah, who has been sitting in the recesses of her shop, hears the dancing and leaves the shop to join in. She is swept up in the rejoicing even though at this point she remains ignorant of its cause.

> When the other women saw what the two were doing, they, too, got up, put their hands on their hips, and danced, until the very ground under their feet was dancing. Do you think I am exaggerating when I say the ground danced? No, it actually did. Do you think it danced more easily because it was denuded of houses? In fact, there were still the ruins of houses there, and these, too, danced. And those women who had forgotten how to dance with their feet did so with their hands, tapping their fingers so as to enliven the dancing. Do you think Sarah was unhappy because everyone was rejoicing and she did not know the reason? On the contrary, she was as happy as any of them. That is the power of true joy. Fortunate is he who is privileged to experience it; even without knowing what it is about, he can rejoice. So great is the power of joy, you see, that since the day Buczacz was founded there had never been a mother who went to her son's wedding in everyday clothes, but Sarah went in her shop clothes, and in spite of this her joy was uninterrupted and undiminished [. . . .]" (584)

The dancing described in this passage, it is important to note, takes place *before* the wedding ceremony. It is a spontaneous expression that erupts at the very news of Menahem's resolve to stand under the hupah with the abused bride. The narrator works very hard to persuade us that the dancing was so joyous that it turns hyperboles into literal truths and passes from the human realm to the surrounding physical world. The ground dances, and even the ruins, reminders of the town's calamity, are compelled to surrender to the exaltation. Can there be no greater testament to the power of true joy, the narrator sagely conjectures, than a mother's willingness to attend her son's wedding in her everyday cloths?

As the women shake the earth with their dancing, the scene switches to the male arena. The leisurely visit of the old hazzan R. Netanel to the rabbi is interrupted by the joyous clamor and then by the entrance of the shamash Mikhl Ber, who urges the rabbi to join the wedding party. Doing so would be no small thing for the rabbi, who has not been seen in public since his return from Kamenetz. But out of love for Buczacz he assents. Attired in his special rabbinic coat and his shtreimel and with his walking stick in hand, he sets forth accompanied on his right by R. Netanel and on left by Mikhl Ber. The composition of his retinue is not accidental. The hazzan, who is about to depart for the Land of Israel, represents the dialectical linkage between Buczacz and Zion, and the elderly shamash is valued by the rabbi as a font of anecdotes about his esteemed predecessors in the town's rabbinate. As they stride toward the courtyard of the Great Synagogue, they are thronged by old men and boys, "all wishing to welcome him back from Russia." The men join the women as the entire Jewish population of the city turn out to celebrate the wedding. This indeed is the city in its fullness.

And so "In a Single Moment" ends in a grand consummation. The beloved but errant rabbi is reunited with his flock, a promising young scholar finds a true match based on kindness rather than greed, the anxiety of his parents allayed, a vulnerable young woman is rescued from an exploitative union, the life's work of a saintly woman is rewarded through the marriage of her great-granddaughter, the integrity of the marriage system is restored, and the dark forces of disintegration are held at bay. The gathering together of all these strands unleashes an explosion of joy that engulfs the entire community. Buczacz, for one shining moment, has again become Buczacz. The transcendence and totality that conclude the story are real—real in the sense of being presented without irony—but their realness depends on a crucial condition: The redemption embodied in this fruition is, by its nature, evanescent. It is a moment of redemption,

Commented [JS20]: Making a cameo appearance from his own story "The Frogs".

not Redemption itself. Here again the multivalence of the story's title serves both to expand and to constrict our hope. A single, sacrificial act of courageous kindness performed at the right time has the power to purchase an everlasting portion in the world to come. But in this world, the duration of that redemption, no matter how illuminating its intensity, can only be a moment. And, as in the case of the shamash and Elijah, this is not nothing.

The ending of "In a Single Moment" is especially important because of the story's placement in *A City in its Fullness*. The story is the first of a trio of stories—the other two are "Frogs" and "Pisces"--that bring the fiction of the volume to a conclusion. (They are followed by a hundred pages of anecdotes and vignettes about the later rabbis of Buczacz.[21]) I use the term fiction uncomfortably because it is not a category that Agnon would recognize as being a meaningful distinction in the context of this volume. In his eyes, all of the over one hundred and forty narrative texts in *A City in its Fullness* are *sipurim*, stories, and he would not differentiate between those that are historical or ethnographic in nature and those that conform to the canons of what we regard as fiction. This study has focused on the approximately twenty substantial stories that fit the description of modernist fiction and deserve to join the canon of Agnon's greatest stories. "In a Single Moment" is one of the three contiguous stories that bring this kind of modernist writing to an end. Before examining the conclusion of "Pisces," the last of these, let us consider how Agnon brings "In a Single Moment" to its closure.

The narrator looks ahead to the future progeny of the auspicious match that has just been solemnized under the hupah:

> Thus it was that all the sons and grandsons of Menaḥem, son of Avraham David, were devoted to the study of Torah and obedient to the Torah, among them scholars of halakhah, *well-known in the gates*[22]—until the enemy came and wiped them all out.
>
> They were wiped out, but the mercies of Him who is to be blessed were not. For every good deed bears fruit, which, in turn, bears more fruit. And if the Almighty grants me life and strength and tranquility, I shall relate some of the good deeds that the good among the people of Israel did when the Holy One, blessed be He, was good to Israel, and Israel was beloved of the Holy One. (588)

Many of the stories in *A City in its Fullness* end with this pattern: Generation upon generation continued the way of life of the Jewish community of Buczacz until its sudden annihilation by the Nazis. Lacking in this instance are the epithets of revulsion and denunciation that usually accompany these closing references to the enemy. The reason for this austerity is likely connected to the turn toward God's mercies in the next line and to a disinclination to position a rhetoric of perfidy in proximity to God's name. The juxtaposition itself between absolute evil and absolute good requires linguistic finesse. Agnon takes the root *k.l.h* and exploits the difference in its meaning between its transitive sense (to wipe out) and its intransitive sense (to cease to be, to be exhausted). The Nazis wiped out the Jews, who ceased to exist as a community of Buczacz as a result, but God's mercies have not been exhausted.

In the closing paragraph, the voice of the narrator collapses into that of Agnon, the author and *magister* of the entire project of the Buczacz stories. The idea that good deeds bear fruit that in turn produces more fruit is central to "In a Single Moment." Joy propagates more joy, and a marriage founded on an act of kindness is destined to produce learned and God-fearing progeny. Yet, by a barely perceptible sleight of hand, this notion is transposed from the representational plane of Buczacz and the stories about it to the vocation of the writer. The process of propagation and bearing fruit now takes place, or continues to take place, not in the good deeds themselves but in the writing about them. The potential recipient of God's grace ("if the Almighty grants me life and strength and tranquility") is the writer himself. Unspoken is the failure of God's grace to avail the Jews of Buczacz, whose ancestors are the subject the writer takes for himself. Agnon's intentionality reverberates strongly in these closing lines. The death of his city will not be his theme but its life; yet, in the aftermath of his city's destruction, that life will be known only through his stories.

THE CITY AND THE ARTIST: A CONCLUDING MEDITATION

The life of Buczacz can now be known *only* through the stories told us by the author/narrator. As the fictional arc of *A City in its Fullness* comes to a close, a crucial, valedictory gesture is made toward the meta-fictional underpinning of the project, its ultimate told-ness. This study of the stories has emphasized all along the pivotal role of the narrator as a

device invented by Agnon to convey to us the world of Buczacz. To be sure, the narrator never lets us forget that the stories are not just there but are being told to us by him. Nevertheless, Agnon refrains from what we would now call a postmodernist stance in which the "truth" of the stories is undercut by a pervasive awareness that they are constructed and manipulated inventions. It is of signal importance to Agnon to create a sense of the "fullness" of the city, of the real density of its manifold life, and not to vitiate our belief in its historical truth.

The truth of Buczacz is of a city founded on Torah and worship, even with all its complicating deviations. There comes a point, however, when *that* Buczacz ceases to exist. The post-partition stories ("Feivush," "Disappeared," and the Yekele stories) trace the forces, internal and external, that lead up to this break. When the break takes place, the subject of *A City in its Fullness* disappears. Agnon's separation from his beloved object of representation is enacted in "Pisces," the last of the fictional narratives. It is in that story that Buczacz as a subject is simultaneously annihilated and sublimated into art. The fictional arc that ends in "Pisces" began in the foundational story "The Sign." In that story, as will be recalled from the discussion in Chapter One, an Agnon-like first-person narrator hears the terrible news about the murder of the last Jews of his city Buczacz on the eve of the holiday of Shavuot and represses his grief until a mystical encounter with the medieval poet Solomon ibn Gabirol. The poet composes a sacred poem to commemorate the city, and that act of composition implicitly serves as a consecration whereby the narrator accepts the vocation of memorializing his city in prose if not in poetry. Through the monumental course of *A City in its Fullness*, with its hundreds of stories, Agnon has discharged that burden and sustained the vivid and material reality of his city. Now, as the project is brought to a close, Agnon makes a significant gesture toward the imaginative underpinning of the entire enterprise, just as he did in "The Sign" at the very beginning.

"Pisces" is conspicuous among all the stories of *A City in its Fullness* for having drawn the attention of major critics at a time when the volume as a whole received little attention. Yehudah Freidlander, Shmuel Werses, Gershon Shaked, Michal Arbell and Avidov Lipsker, among others, have devoted major critical essays to the story.[23] In 1981 the story was published separately in an album format with illustrations by the well-known Israeli artist Yosl Bergner.

"Pisces" is undoubtedly one of Agnon's great achievements and a highpoint of modern Hebrew literature in general. Yet the reason it has attracted critical attention is not just its greatness but also its difference from the other stories in *A City in its Fullness* and its similarity

to earlier works in the Agnon corpus. "Pisces" is distinguished by its magic realism, Rabelaisian descriptions of the body, antic satire, and carnivalesque reversals of social roles. The story presents the reader with, among other things, the account of the career of a great fish told from its own point of view. The story of the fish parallels in miniature the great narrative of the dog Balak in Agnon's 1945 novel ~~*Yesteryear*~~*Only Yesterday*, a linkage, in fact, that the narrator makes explicit. All of these modernist, and some might say ~~postmodernists~~postmodernist, techniques give "Pisces" a filiation with some of Agnon's more experimental interwar stories. Although there is surely nothing wrong with appreciating the story as such, left open is the meaning of "Pisces" in its own context, as the end piece of the vast enterprise of *A City in its Fullness*, and in its relation to the many strong stories that precede it. It is to be hoped that through an analysis of these stories this study has made the case for the existence of a late style that Agnon developed specifically for the purpose of re-imagining the lost world of Buczacz and all it represented. "Pisces" needs to be understood in relation to the enterprise of which it is a part rather than being plucked like a cherry and savored on its own.

Reading "Pisces" this way demonstrates how the story's antic elements serve a distinct purpose in dissolving and vitiating the image of Buczacz that has been constructed throughout this immense story sequence. That image is of an imperfect *qehilah qedoshah*, a community of Jews that strives to lives under God's law, with all the vagaries of human nature and all the inimical external interventions that frustrate this aspiration. The stories are continually negotiating among these norms and deviations as the negotiations are overseen by a narrator who is constrained to tell the truth even as the truth disappoints his devotion to his city. Spread out over the stories is a large and variegated cast of characters, ranging from the most erudite scholars and imposing merchants to the humblest charcoal makers and juvenile delinquents. There are rare moments in which the separation between this world and the next is breached, a descent into Gehinnom or a brief visitation by a scholar from the Heavenly Academy; but the fantastic is by and large absent from the representation of Buczacz. The narrator is a believer whose view of the world is not far differentiated from that of the religious elite of his time(s), and it sees God's ~~had~~ hand working in the world and it has room for anomalous occurrences. But, again, the voice belongs to a garrulous chronicler who, though he loves to tell stories, seeks to tell us what really happened.

In "Pisces" this complex world collapses. Buczacz, in its teaming variegation, is reduced to the corpulent belly of a gluttonous money lender named Fishl Carp. The desire to devour the world in order to sate the senses ends in devouring the representation of Buczacz itself. Aside from the great fish and an orphan who lives in the beit midrash, the social landscape of the city, so palpably present in the city even after the fire in "In a Single Moment," has been denuded. The fish, which enters the river system from the ocean and finds its way to Buczacz's own Strypa, is presented as Fishl's double. Outsized and powerful, the fish devotes the whole of its time to feeding itself and consuming the weaker of its species, and it interprets the cowed obeisance of other fish as adulation due it. Both creatures, man and fish, are reducible to their appetites, and this reduction of the human to the animal opens up limitless possibilities for parody and comic inversions. But this ribaldry is dark. Unlike Rabelais's sixteenth-century humanism, which positions the appetites as a way of taking in a newly enlarging world of experience, in"Pisces" the cycle of ingesting and being ingested ends in death. Most destabilizing to the world constructed in *A City in its Fullness* is a disturbing alteration in the narrator's moral reliability. Fishl's obesity and voraciousness are of such prodigious proportions that the narrator is fascinated and amazed to the point where he is enthralled and stripped of moral judgment. No previous narrator swears more vociferously that he is vigilant on behalf of the truth and nothing but the truth and at the same time lacks all sense of moral proportion. The irrelevance of his discernment reaches its apotheosis in the story's final paragraph, in which he states that the moral to be drawn from all that has gone before is that one should not walk via the marketplace on the way to synagogue in the morning in order to avoid temptation, and this he makes in to the grand lesson.

The orphaned and impoverished~~penurious~~ Bezalel Moshe is the only figure in the story who stands apart from the forces of degeneration embodied in Fishl. He sleeps in the beit midrash and sits in a corner out of sight, where he draws *mizraḥim*, placards with illuminated biblical verses hung on the eastern wall of homes to mark the direction faced during prayer. The few pennies he receives for his work do not suffice to prevent him from existing in a constant state of hunger. It is to Bezalel Moshe that Fishl consigns the fish when he arrives at the beit midrash to say his prayers; he orders the young man to transport the fish without delay to his wife so she can have it prepared in time for his return. The money lender and the orphan occupy the antipodes of the social scale, and the former treats the latter with insult and condescension.

Commented [JS21]: Problem: Pisces takes place in Adar 1864 – a year before the fire (and before "Until Elijah Comes")

As Fishl looks over ~~the~~ Bezalel Moshe's shoulder as he draws an image of two fish, head to tail—the sign of Pisces, *mazal dagim*—he ridicules the likeness as being one drawn by someone who has never seen a fish living or dead, which is indeed the case. Being put in possession of the fish gives Bezalel Moshe the chance to undo that deficiency. Rather than rushing to deliver his burden, he sits by the side of the road and contemplates the fish, devouring it with his eyes. From within the intensity of his observation, he is granted a vision of "the fish that had been in the will of the Holy One, blessed be He, to create when He created the fish. But He had not created it. He had left it to artists to draw" ( ). Bezalel Moshe is suddenly seized by a paroxysm of desire to draw, and, lacking paper or canvas, he uses a bit of chalk he finds in his pocket to draw directly on the skin of the fish. He draws a likeness of Fishl and further adorns the fish with the black box and leather straps of the tefilah—the singular of tefilin—for the head, which Fishl in his haste to pray and get home to eat had left in the tallit sack~~sac~~ used to house the fish.

The story ends in a cascade of reversals and blurred boundaries. Fishl dies in an apoplectic spasm upon returning to his home. Generations later, his tombstone has sunken into the ground, obscuring his name. All that is visible is the top of the stone with its engraving of the lifelike sign of Pisces based on a drawing by Bezalel Moshe.

"Pisces" is a brilliant and complex work of art, and it is not my intention here, as my own study of *A City in its Fullness* comes to its conclusion, to take up the story's many exegetical challenges. I seek only to illuminate the place of the story at the end of the great fictional arc of the volume. My argument is this: In "Pisces," the unitary mode of telling that Agnon developed for the Buczacz stories breaks down and devolves into two elements. One is the world of Buczacz as a social organism, which has undergone a process of reduction and debasement. Buczacz has become Fishl, and it no longer merits the project of sustained representation. The other is the act of making of art that underlies the activity of storytelling. This meta-fictional level remained largely unexposed for the duration of *A City in its Fullness*, as befitting the mental world of the traditionalist narrator Agnon created to present the stories. But here in "Pisces" we have Bezalel Moshe, an artist figure who represents the only alternative to Fishl's mode of being in the world. It is significant that Agnon chose to make this artist a maker of visual images rather than a fashioner of words. Despite his lack of training and the crude folk art he produces, the vision of artistic creation granted Bezalel Moshe is radically prior to the garrulous storytelling practiced by the narrator of the volume's stories.

[18] See the similarly positive portrayal of this relationship in the beginning of the story "The Partners," p. ??.

[19] A person can become entangled in his neighbor's sins, according to the Talmud in Shabbat 55b–56b, which gives examples of "death without sin and suffering without iniquity." (My thanks to Michael Swirsky for this reference.)

[20] Lamentations 4:5. See my analysis of this trope in *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press,), pp??

[21] On Emunah Yaron's decisions.

[22] Well-known in the gates: Prov. 31:23: the husband of a "capable wife" is "well-known in the gates" (gathering places) of the city.

[23] Gershon Shaked, *Omanut hasipur shel Agnon* [The Art of the Story in Agnon] (Merhavia: Sifriat Poalim, 1976) and *Panim aherot bitsirato shel Shai Agnon*; Shmuel Werses, "Between Man and Beast: Motifs and their Transformations in *A City in its Fullness*" in Gershon Shaked and Rafi Weiser, *Shai Agnon: Mehkarim ute'udot* [S. Y. Agnon: Studies and Documents] (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1977), 253-67; Yehuda Friedlander, "Satirical Texture in *A City in its Fullness*: Notes on the Stories 'The Frogs' and 'Pisces'" in *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: mivhar ma'amarim 'al yetsirato* [S. Y. Agnon: A Selection of Criticism] (Am Oved, 1982); Michal Arbell, *Katuv 'al 'oro shel kelev: 'al tefisat haytsirah etsel Shai Agnon* [Written on the Skin of a Dog: The Act of Creation in S. Y. Agnon] (Beer Sheva: Heksherim and Ben Gurion University Press, 206), 132=52. + Rina Lee, Lipsker and Mishiker.

[24] See "Agunot" in *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories by S. Y. Agnon*. Ben Uri's name is taken from the second name of Bezalel ben Uri, the builder of the desert sanctuary in Exodus.

[6] The gift of a kerchief from a husband to a wife recalls the story "The Kerchief" mentioned above (see note 2). In that story the kerchief is a richly endowed symbol of the sanctity and purity that inhere in family attachments.

[7]] Although the story doesn't use the term, what he has done is an instance of *me'ilah*, the appropriation for one's own benefit of resources devoted to holy purposes. It is a cardinal sin for those invested with the community's trust.

[8] "Vagrant," with its slight pejorative inflection, is a translation of the Hebrew *helekh*, which comes from the common verb to walk or travel. The Hebrew emphasizes impermanence, sojourning, and movement rather than poverty. The *helekh* is a *homo viator*.

[9] Again, there is a strong connection to the story "The Kerchief" and the figure of the beggar, who is not the Messiah but who presents an opportunity—and a test—relating to the capacity to perform acts of kindness that contribute to the process of redemption.

[10] The terms employed, *ye'ush* and *ye'ush gamur*, are familiar from the ethical literature of the time.

[11] Note to Sippur pashut.

[12] "In a Single Moment" first appeared in *Ha'aretz* in September 16 and 25, 1955. Agnon is reported to have special regard for the story. See David Canaani, *Shai Agnon be'al peh* [S. Y. Agnon in His Own Words] (Merhavia: Kibbutz Hameuchad, 1971), 51-52. In one of the few critical discussions of the story, Shmuel Werses states that Agnon first thought about the plot for the story in 1948. Shmuel Werses, "Intertextual Patterns and their Function in "In a Single Moment" [Hebrew] in Emunah Yaron et al. (eds.), *Qovets Agnon II* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), 213-224. See also, S. D. Goitein, "In a Single Moment" [Hebrew] in *Le'Agnon shaiy* [A Tribute to Agnon] (Jerusalem: The Jewish Agency, 1965), 27-45.

[13] Translations from "A Single Moment" are by Michael Swirsky.

[14] The question of whether such early marriage—and early procreation--is or is not a good thing for the boy and the girl is not dealt with in this story or elsewhere in *A City in its Fullness*. A severe critique of this practice is one of the themes of the new Hebrew literature that emerges in the nineteenth century. See my *Banished from their Father's Table: Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 199?), ch. ?. On the social background of this practice, see Shaul Stampfer, *Families, Rabbis and Education* (Oxford: The Littman Library, 2010), chaps. 1-2, pp. 7-55.

[15] On the origins of Tu B'Av, see Vered Noam, *Megilat ta'anit* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2003), 217; and Paul Mandel, "Never Were There Such Good Days for Israel," [Hebrew] *Te'udah* 11 (1996), 147-48. Through an analysis of the textual witnesses, Mandel argues that the festivity surrounding the offering of the trees preceded the matchmaking.

[16] Laor biography

[17] The issue concerns the recitation of the mystical formula *leshem yihud*. This is a kabbalistic practice intended to enhance awareness of the commandment's capacity to effect reunification with the Godhead. The controversy reflects the deep penetration of Lurianic Kabbalah into the religious life of Polish Jewry as well as equally deep concerns about the potential sectarian exploitation of these practices. <You might want to make more explicit that the issue is penetration of Hassidic practice of reciting the Lurianic formula, which was protested in Buczacz by the Missnagdim who still held the Hassidim at bay.>

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But it is not necessarily better. There is nothing idealized about Bezalel Moshe as a figure of the artist, and there is none of the romantic agony attached to the figure of Ben Uri, the artist in Agnon first published story "Agunot."[24] Because of his material deprivation, Bezalel Moshe is as consumed by hunger as Fishl, and when a penny comes his way he spends it on cherries rather than paper and pencils. The logic of the plot implies that Fishl's death is brought about by the delay in delivering the fish and by confusing and fusing the dead fish with the live money lender. Although Bezalel Moshe is vouchsafed a supreme vision of the ideal fish, all he ends up drawing is the likeness of Fishl on the dead fish. Given the chance to observe the great fish close up, the height of his artistic creation is merely the more lifelike sign of Pisces that adorns Fishl's headstone. Bezalel Moshe is truly an artist and his gifts are real; but this endowment does nothing to ameliorate the hunger and insult that is his lot. He is a hunger artist who creates in privation.

[This section remains unfinished. In the final form of the book, this will become part of a kind of afterword, a concluding meditation on the project of *A City in its Fullness*, which will use "Pisces" as an indication of what the book in the main *is not*.]

NOTES

Commented [JS22]: Irony: neither Fishel nor Bezalel Moshe eat in the story (Fishl only has a hot drink, BM a couple of cherries), yet both are completely preoccupied with eating (from opposite directions). Story isn't about filling appetite, but inability to do so. Both are hungry, and that interferes with the mitzvot of each: BM even if he fasts on a fast day it hardly counts as he never eats anyway. He's never even seen a fish. Only when BM is drawing does his mind leave his troubles – only art allows a man to be human (מותר האדם מן הבהמה אין)

Commented [JS23]: Death is caused not by the delivery delay but by the wife's panic at seeing Fishl (in his Tefilla shel Rosh) transformed into a fish, leading to her dropping it (and tefillin) on ground, at which point he arrive sot see both on ground and realizing he has to fast!
Of course, Agnon gives alternate version in which he doesn't doe but is done in by the 3 kugels of Shabbat Rosh-Chodesh Chanuka.

[1] *A City in its Fullness* contains close to one hundred pages of additional material, to be sure; but these two texts are the last full-fledged fictional stories. ("Frogs" [Tsefarde'im, pp. 589-602] intervenes between the two, but it can be considered as a kind of study for "Pisces.") In Emunah Yaron's editing, the volume concludes with "The Sign" [Hasiman, pp. 695-716], a story of formidable importance but one that was previously published. As I argued in Ch. X, the story is a consecration story that explains Agnon's calling to undertake the writing the Buczacz stories but does not belong to the project proper.

[2] First published in *Davar (Musaf)*, VII/33 (July 22, 1932). The story appears in the standard edition in the volume *Eilu ve'eilu*, pp. 256-67.

[3] See Chapter Five, pp. XX.

[4] For a useful overview of the different modalities of the Elijah legends, see Beatrice Silverman Weinreich, "Genre and Types of Yiddish Folk Tales about the Prophet Elijah" in ed. Uriel Weinreich, *The Field of Yiddish (Second Collection)* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1965), 202-25

[5] Translations from "Until Elijah Comes" are by Herbert Levine and Reena Spicehandler.