CHAPTER FOUR

WORSHIP AND DANGER:

A CANTORIAL TRIPTYCH

Although Agnon's commitment to the imaginative reclamation of Buczacz was total, he adduced little interest in the totality of that representation. Rendering a comprehensive, panoramic account of the city, after the manner of latter-day historians, was never his goal. From the outset of his grand project, Agnon was unapologetic about his intention to establish the city he was rebuilding in his fiction upon the twin pillars of *torah* and *'avodah*, study and worship. The kind of fullness he had in mind when he chose the overall title for his work was not of the heterogeneous variety; it was a richness of depth in those norms of experience and practice that, in his conviction, bore ultimate importance for the nation. But to identify study and worship as the norms organizing *Ir umelo'ah* is only to begin the discussion, because norms are aspirations rather than realizations. As deliberate structures of value, norms project a community's best self and the set of ideals to which its discourse is oriented. But norms do not tell the *story* of the community, which is the chronicle of the forces and circumstances that impede the norms from being fulfilled.

The institution of public worship illustrates these complexities. On the one hand, there was no religious observance more pervasively and consistently practiced by males than daily communal prayer. Adult males who lived in town almost universally attended services early in the morning and then again in the early evening. Village Jews and rural tavern operators who had no access to a prayer quorum of ten men accounted this a regrettable disability. The very founding of Buczacz is presented as being born of a heartfelt longing for communal prayer. Yet the pervasiveness of this practice—its very normativity—is not the same as its spiritual success or failure. On Sabbaths and holidays, when the liturgy and its melodic signatures were more elaborate and sacred poems of great linguistic difficulty had to be properly recited and when there was a general expectation for spiritual uplift, the congregation relied upon the expertise of

especially adept lay prayer leaders (*ba'alei tefilah*) or professional cantors (*hazzanim*). But the experience of the worshipers and that of the emissaries who represent them before God are not identical. At the same time as the hearts of the faithful may have been uplifted, the individuals charged with leading them expose themselves to the dangers of trafficking in the holy.

This is the duality of worship in Agnon's reimagining of Buczacz: the routine of long-sanctioned communal practice alongside the radical instability of individual fates. Much of Book One of *Ir umelo'ah,* as was surveyed in the reconstructed guided tour of Chapter X, is taken up with introducing the reader to the houses of worship of Buczacz and delineating the liturgical customs of the community. The narrator-guide placed special emphasis on the continuity in liturgical texts and practices between the ancient communities of the Rhineland Valley and his native town in Galicia. The detailed section on the particular order of the prayers in the Friday evening service ("Seder qabalat shabbat," pp. 40-42) demonstrated how the liturgical innovations thrown off by the kabbalistic revolution in sixteenth-century Safed were seamlessly integrated into the hoary Ashkenazic rite. Pains were taken to present the appurtenances of the synagogue that were special to Buczacz, such as the Italian chandelier and the etched glass panel for the recitation of the blessing for the New Moon, as well as to tell us unique and astonishing stories attached to the origins of those objects (the menorah, Elijah's seat) that would have typically been found in other towns like Buczacz. In Agnon's reconstruction of Buczacz, it is the synagogue that stands for the town as a whole. It is little wonder that the narrator of the story "Hasiman" [The Sign], having just heard about the final liquidation of the Jews of Buczacz, reimagines his native town by placing in this mind's eye each male head of family, together with his sons and sons-in-law, not at home but in his hereditary pew in the synagogue.[1] And it is in the synagogue that received sanctioned practices, minhagim, hold sway, enforced by the careful eyes of the shamash and the gabbai and their successors throughout the generations.[2]

Yet for the hazzanim, the professional cantors employed by the community to lead the service on the holiest occasions, the synagogue was not always a realm of reassuring fixity and correctness. A hazzan functioned as a *sheliah tsibur*, a representative or emissary of the congregation before God, at these moments of heightened religious consequence, and the metaphor of an emissary sent on a high errand does not miss the mark. For the successful

fulfillment of the mission in question, nothing less than the acceptance of the prayers of Israel before God, is by no means taken for granted. That acceptance presupposes, of course, the sincerity and purity of heart of the worshippers the hazzan is representing, but it also depends upon his own ability to acquit himself of a complex and fraught set of challenges. Although the Hebrew text of the ancient statutory liturgy was well known, the baroque sublimities of the piyyutim, the sacred poems that formed a proud part of the rite in Galician communities, demanded enormous expertise to be articulated correctly. A hazzan's musicianship came into play on several levels. Although the power, range and beauty of his voice were endowments beyond his control, by training he could acquire mastery of *nusah*, the corpus of traditional melodies used to perform the texts of the service, and, working within the tradition, he could even introduce original musical settings of his own. Success in creating a fulfilling experience for the hazzan's congregants also depended on their confidence in the quality of his piety in everyday life and on the performance of that piety as religious fervor when he represented them in the sacred service. He faced the daunting challenge of at one and the same time deploying the full resources of his virtuosity and remaining sufficiently invisible so that his own personality ~~does~~ should not interfere with the responsibility to serve as a representative of the interests of others.

Now all this creates a high bar of professional accomplishment, but can it truly be said to be dangerous? The source of danger comes not from the demands and expectations of the congregation located behind the hazzan as he stands facing the Holy Ark so much as from the numinous authority that emanates from the ark itself. This requires a brief excursus about the terminology connected to the synagogue service. In Talmudic literature, the container housing the Torah scrolls is called the *teivah*. The eastern wall of ancient synagogues contained a niche in which the teivah was placed during the service after being carried in from an adjoining room; over time, the teivah became a fixed installation within the main hall of the synagogue. When an elder was asked to lead prayers, he was asked *liqrav el hateivah*, to approach the teivah. The act of accepting that commission, stepping forward and taking up a position as the *ba'al tefilah*, the prayer leader—and later hazzan—is called one of two terms: *la'avor lifnei hateivah* (to pass before the teivah) or *leired lifnei hateivah* (to descend before the teivah). The distinction is not material and may have reflected differences in the construction of synagogues in Babylonia and Palestine in Late Antiquity.[3] What remains key is the term teivah itself. In the ancient Jerusalem

Commented [JS1]: In antiquity (bavel) it was not Eastern Wall per se, but that which turned to Jerusalem. But re Europe, where it was of course Mizrach, the term "ancient" is misleading.

Commented [JS2]: or is it likarev (or lehikarev)

Temple, the ark containing the Tablets of the Law, on which were written the Ten Commandments, was called the *aron haberit* (Ark of the Covenant), and it was located in the Holy of Holies. After the Destruction in 70 C.E., synagogues and oral prayer, which had long existed parallel to the Jerusalem Temple, were recognized as authorized replacements for the Temple and the system of sacrificial offerings. In this system of substitutions, the teivah ~~assumed the function~~took on the symbolic weight of the *aron haberit*; although it contained the words of the Torah written by human hand on parchment rather than the original tablets with their divine inscriptions, the teivah carried over some of the numinous potency of the object it replaced. Later on, in Ashkenazic synagogues the teivah was called the *aron qodesh* (the holy ark), and in Sephardi synagogues the *heikhal* (chamber).

Less clear are the origins of the office of the hazzan, who descends or passes before the teivah. During the period of the Talmud, the duties of the hazzan seem to be closer to those of the shamash, the synagogue sexton or beadle, that are familiar to us from a later period. The hazzan is in charge of moving the teivah into position for public worship and supervising the care and placement of the Torah scrolls. The chanting of the liturgy on special Sabbaths and holidays was often handled by the *payytan*, the composer of sacred poems, texts of great complexity and erudition, which were integrated into the synagogue service.[4] It is not until the Middle Ages in Ashkenaz that we encounter the hazzan in a role more familiar to us as a singer employed by the community to lead public worship on important occasions. This professionalization of the role was likely necessitated by the consolidation in the Ashkenazic rite of both the canonical piyyutim and the melodies associated with them and with specific statutory prayers. In Galicia of the period Agnon is writing about in *Ir umelo'ah*, the contracted responsibilities of the hazzan would have been generally codified. In the case of R. Yitzhak Wernick, who was the hazzan of Buczacz in the years after the 1648 massacres—as his grandfather of the same name was before those events—those duties are specified as follows: "R. Yitzhak delighted the hearts of his brethren with his pleasant voice on the eves of Sabbaths when the new moon is blessed, Sabbaths on which *yotserot* are recited, the eves of holidays and during the holiday itself, the eve of Rosh Hashanah and on Rosh Hashanah itself, the eve of Yom Kippur, *musaf* and *ne'ilah*, and on the days on which *selihot* are recited" (70). The hazzan also performed at weddings and "brought delight to the bridegroom and bride under the *hupah*."

Commented [JS3]: What is ORAL prayer? Why not just prayer?

Alongside this professionalization and routinization, there remained the potent residue of the connection between the hazzan and the priests in the Jerusalem Temple. When sacrificial offerings were the main channel of divine worship, careful attention to prescribed protocols was a matter not just of proper procedure but the life-and-death consequences of mishandling the holy materials. The instant death meted out to Aaron's sons Nadav and Abihu in Leviticus 10 for the "alien fire" brought on the altar is the foundational monitory tale of priestly recklessness. Although after the Destruction the sacrificial cult had been abrogated and the priesthood effectively abolished and disbanded, the peril and uncertainty involved in representing the community of Israel before God did not wholly dissipate. The Rabbis worked vigorously to persuade the people that the "service of the heart," the oral recitation of a written liturgy, was every bit as acceptable to God as the smell of burnt animals sincerely offered. The replacement of the one Temple by many synagogues was therefore not merely symbolic; holiness resides where it is allowed to be vested, and the *qehilah qedoshah*, the holy community of Buczacz or any other pious congregation in the diaspora, in the finest moments of its worship aspired to compel God's presence to dwell within it. It was now the hazzan, having inherited the priest's mantel, who was most frontally exposed to the holy as he represented the faithful.

The fusion of these two roles is most keenly experienced during the Avodah Service on Yom Kippur, which describes the solemn preparations of the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, for entering the Holy of Holies and uttering the secret name of God. The liturgy for the service is taken from the text of one of several medieval piyyutim—the differences are according to rite and region—which are in turn based on Leviticus 16 and Mishnah Yoma. The Avodah stands apart from the rest of the liturgy on Yom Kippur or any other occasion. The prayers of the siddur are almost always cast as the worshiper's direct address to God that is transpiring in the present moment as it is being uttered. The Avodah, however, is a historical reenactment of the divine service that took place in the Temple on Yom Kippur before it was destroyed. It a kind of oratorio that tells the story of the High Priest ~~on Yom Kippur~~ in which both the hazzan and the congregation play roles. The hazzan plays the role of the High Priest and the congregants play the role of the Israelites who thronged the courtyard outside the Holy of Holies awaiting the priest's emergence after his ordeal. His emergence hale from the Holy of Holies was not a foregone conclusion. Pronouncing the four-letter name of God at the exact point on Earth in which divine holiness was most powerfully concentrated exposed the High Priest to great danger,

and any flaws in his worthiness could result in disaster for his person and for the nation. This is the contingency that is discussed by community notables who gather in the home of the gabbai after the fast in the second of the stories about hazzanim. Referring to the text of the Avodah service, one of the guests makes a learned point:

> [The High Priest] would make a holiday for his friends after emerging safely from the Holy. Because it states "when he emerged safely from the Holy," we learn that it was not every year that he emerged safely from the Holy. Either the soul of the High Priest expired or the soul of the people. (p. 87)

The context of the discussion is an appreciation of the powerful performance of the Avodah turned in that day by R. Gavriel, a visitor who had come to Buczacz to do business and visit his grandfather's grave and had been prevailed upon to serve as prayer leader because of his beautiful and fervent voice. The point of the observation is that, despite the fact that the Avodah is merely a narrative of what took place long ago when the Temple still existed, its numinous power, and the threat it contains, are still felt today when the prayer leader hits the right spiritual pitch. In musing on the profound experience of the Avodah service that day, the same speaker of the passage above goes on to aver that "there are some narratives [*sipurei devarim*] that bring the listener to such powerful longings that the soul expires" (p. 87).

It is this continuity of danger that Agnon's stories about hazzanim seek to convey. Something of the risks the priests exposed themselves to in handling the "fissionable" materials of the Sanctuary so very long ago was carried over into the lives of the hazzanim. Agnon's strategy for underscoring the connection is to make the teivah into a quasi-animate object, a portentous source of authority, which suffers the proximity of some prayer leaders and repels that of others, to their peril. The opening sentence of the second of the stories about hazzanim, "Ha'ish levush habadim" [The Linen Man] tells us that after the death of the long-lived R. Elyah, "the teivah stood with no permanent hazzan" (p.84), and we assume as a matter of course that the phrase "the teivah stood" (*'amdah hateivah*) is simply a figure of speech. But a few sentences later, we are told: "Because passing before the teivah was permitted to anyone, people *whom the teivah would not countenance* (*sh'ein hateivah qolletam*) began to storm the teivah, this one on the strength of his having a yahrzeit and that one because he believes that his voice is as pleasant to others as it is to himself" (my emphasis). The third story in the triptych concerns a hazzan

Commented [JS4]: Cute use, but maybe "radioactive" is better.

also named R. Gavriel who has withdrawn from serving as a hazzan in Buczacz but still enforces high standards when it comes to public worship. "So long as R. Gavriel was alive, even though he did not pass before the teivah, the *teivah did not complain* (*hateivah lo qavlah*) about the prayer leaders because no one without a voice dared approach the teivah" (p. 120, my emphasis). Endowing the teivah with agency and judgment is, so far as I can tell, Agnon's imaginative invention. To be sure, the animation of the teivah does not bring it to the point of becoming a cartoon figure or pushing it over into the realm of the fantastic. But it is just enough to register the serious risks involved in drawing close to the teivah. These stories concern hazzanim who do just that.

As presented by Agnon, the vocation of hazzan exists at the intersection of three important traditions, and that lineage raises it above the other synagogue-related occupations and offices, such a the shamash and the gabbai, with which it is grouped in *Ir umelo'ah*. The first tradition, as we saw above, derives from the connection to the service in the ancient Jerusalem Temple. If on Yom Kippur the hazzan reenacts the role of the High Priest, for the great part of the liturgical year his role is closer to that of the Levites, who performed the Psalms in musical settings as well as tending to the holy objects. The Levites lost their role when the Temple was destroyed, and the function of beautifying the service, which was now an oral liturgy practiced in synagogues, fell to the payyetanim. Their prodigious creativity in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages created a large corpus of sacred poems that circulated among many communities and, especially because of the printing press, became standardized according to region by the time Agnon takes up his chronicle of Buczacz in the seventeenth century. The hazzanim inherited the mantle of the payyetanim; but their focus was not on the creation of new texts but on musical settings for piyyutim that had become part of the canon.

The romantic artist was the second tradition, a tradition, of course, of much more recent provenance, which was retrojected onto the figure of the hazzan of earlier times. A product on nineteenth-century European culture, this conception presents the artist as an individual endowed with a sensitive soul that resonates in tune with the anima mundi, the soul of the universe. In the creative process, the artist converts feeling into signs—images, sound or words—and creates an art object that participates in eternity. His achievement often comes at the expense of his own wellbeing because he has poured into the art object what is most vital in himself; creation thus becomes a kind of self-annihilation, a sacrifice rendered on the altar of art. This was a notion

Commented [JS5]: Hmm! I will try to think about this. Is it possible he's borrowing to the teiva the type of anthropomorphosis we do see for the mizbeach or the aron ha-brit? (e.g., the mizbeach crying).

Commented [JS6]: Cf the Nobel Speech: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1966/agnon-speech.html

that was intrinsic to Agnon's work from its very beginnings. His first major published story "Agunot" featured the figure of Ben Uri, a religious artist who invests so much of his soul in the holy ark he is fashioning that he is eventually cast aside "like a violin whose strings have broken." Agnon sees a set of affinities between the romantic artist and the hazzan. Both are *kelei qodesh*, "holy vessels," a term that describes both the objects in the ancient temple and the persons responsible for handling them. Both have special access to the transcendent and take as their calling the effort to convey that transcendence to others. And because of that proximity both are at risk of being consumed.[5]

The third tradition is martyrology. The hazzan, like the artist, sacrifices himself on behalf of his congregants by drawing too close to the holy. His self-sacrifice has a special resonance within a religious culture that models itself, and not just in its enthusiasm for piyyutim, on the piety of medieval Ashkenaz. When at the end of the eleventh century the Jews of Worms and Speier and Mainz ~~killed~~ martyred themselves and their family members rather than be converted or killed by the Crusaders, they viewed themselves not as being persecuted but as being given an opportunity for spiritual distinction. Because of the sincerity of their piety they were being given the chance to reenact in their own bodies the sacrificial worship of God that had been in abeyance for a thousand years. (This pertains especially to the second story in the triptych.) The iconographic shaping of these extraordinary deeds in the chronicles and piyyutim of the following generation created a delicately balanced paradox. The gentiles who visited these persecutions upon the Jews could be vehemently excoriated while at the same time the acts of self-sacrifice undertaken in response to them could be extolled as *yisurin shel ahavah*, suffering bestowed by God upon those He loves. The martyrological background is the key to the gruesome consummation described in "The Linen Man," and it gives a larger resonance to all the narratives about hazzanim.[ii]

The genealogy of the hazzan, moreover, was far from foreign to Agnon's conception of his own vocation. He seems to have been of two minds on the subject. On the one hand, the narrator of *Ir umelo 'ah* confesses that he is not musical and lacks a memory for melodies. In one of those occasional moments in which he exposes his own, childhood connection to Buczacz, a moment that takes place in the final sentences of the third story in the triptych, the narrator describes how the last hazzan of the town, who was a denizen of the beit midrash at the time as the narrator spent his adolescence there, set some of the his juvenile poems to music. "But

Commented [JS7]: This theme is also front and center in Tmol Shilshom. The very act of writing "Kelev Shoteh" creates a reality with catastrophic effect. For that matter, Betzalel Moshe's sketching on the fish does the same in Mazal Dagim. I think (but don't remember for sure) that Shaked writes on this in his Mazal Dagim chatpter in his book "Panim Acherot beAgnon".
Much has been written on it re Tmol Shilshom.

Commented [JS8]: And in fact the piyyutim where this is most pronounced are the "Akedot" (for obvious reasons connected to martyrdom). In fact the piyyut in the story לפי הצער השכר is an Akeda.

Commented [JS9]: What is this note?

because I am not expert in melody and I do not play, they [the musical settings] did not remain in my mouth and the poems and their melodies were lost" (p. 122). The same incapacity to remember a melody afflicted the narrator at the conclusion of "The Sign." Solomon Ibn Gabirol has miraculously appeared and composed a poem to memorialize the destroyed Buczacz, yet, so overcome by the experience, the narrator cannot remember it, and he has to be consoled by the fact that "the poem sings itself in the heavens above, among the poems of the holy poets, the beloved of God."[6] Apart from his own lack of musical endowment, the narrator exudes a chronic skepticism as to whether, except in rare instances, hazzanim can free themselves from a grandiosity that detracts from the divine service rather than enhancing it.

Yet when it comes to those rare hazzanim who transcend these limitations, Agnon sees intimations of true religious art. Agnon's family was descended from the tribe of Levy, whose members served as psalm singers in Temple, and it is this lineage that allows him, or at least his narrative persona in the story "Hush hare'ah" [A Sense of Smell], to insert himself into a genealogy that begins in the ancient Temple, passes through the library of rabbinic learning, and ends in his vocation as a writer of stories. (The passage is quoted in the Introduction; see p. XX.) Although hazzanim do not appear in this genealogy, they play a key role in a complimentary genealogy laid out in "The Sign." For the Agnon-like first-person narrator of that story, one of the foundational moments of childhood was discovering the stirring poems of Ibn Gabirol first as a text in the prayer book given him by his father, then as sung in the synagogue by the old hazzan, and then again in the big prayer book in his grandfather's house. The fantastic manifestation of Ibn Gabirol to the narrator as an adult during the nighttime Shavuot vigil is a confirmation of an essential affinity of vocation between the great payyetanim and the artistic work of the narrator. Although the figure of the old hazzan of Buczacz cannot attain to the supernal attainments of Ibn Gabirol, his role in actualizing these sacred poems through performance is a crucial, penultimate link in this chain. The last link is the Agnon figure himself. He is the proxy for their tears (*hareini kaparat dim'atam*), and the one who, in stories rather than in song, carries the mantel of their sacred vocation. In short, although he is no aficionado of cantorial singing, Agnon has written himself into the story of sacred song and thereby lifted the figure of the hazzan, in those exceptional instances, to the level of a religious artist.

Commented [JS10]: But in fact also the words get lost, that's the point in HaSiman.

> The first of the hazzanim who served in the Great Synagogue after it was erected was R. Yitzhak Shatz. He was a fourth-generation descendent of the R. Yitzhak Wernick who, eighty years before 1648, served as a loyal representative of his congregants in their prayers; he delighted brides and grooms underneath their canopies with his pleasant voice. (p. 70)

The opening paragraph of "Hazzanim," the first story in the cantorial triptych, presents continuity and steadfastness as the qualities that undergird the office of hazzan. Rather than being an instance of nepotism or hegemony, the fact that the office has been in the hands of one family for so many generations guarantees that the minhag of the community, the sacred protocols of its worship, have been securely protected during the vicissitudes of historical change. Even the duplication and confusion of names is reassuring. Yitzhak Shatz is really Yitzhak Wernick, "shatz" being simply a contraction the name of his office as *sheliah tsibur*, the emissary of the congregation before God. The fact that the great grandson bears the name of the great grandfather underscores the kind of continuity desired in the realm of the sacred service.

The brief sketch of the life of R. Yitzhak Wernick (the great grandson) presented at the opening of the story is absolutely essential to establishing the norm that will almost immediately be violated. He is the paragon of the hazzan. He led the congregation in prayer on all the important Sabbaths and holidays according to the rites they had received from their forebears; he even composed an original melody for the memorial prayer recited on the 20th of Sivan. He made a special contribution to the community's happiness by devoting himself to celebrating weddings and marking the presence of the groom and the bride with special melodies; on those special occasions he displayed his expertise in the complicated etiquette of distributing honors to relatives as part of the Torah reading. In the twenty-two years between the consecration of the Great Synagogue and his death, he was not absent from the synagogue ~~not~~ even for a single

Commented [JS11]: Have you earlier explained/established the meaning of this date? I don't presume readers will know what it is.

day. This included the rioting by the students from the monastery school. When others told him that it was his own merit that had saved him from death, he protested and said "It was the teivah, which recognizing that all my days there has been no ulterior motive in my prayer, hid me from the eyes of the scoundrels" (71). He was succeeded by his eldest son R. Yekutiel, who honored the ancient musical traditions that had been practiced by his forefathers, who had received them "from the exiles of Ashkenaz upon whose piety Buczacz had been founded. R. Yekutiel made no alterations whatever in those melodies and made up no new ones of his own."

Yet just when the negotiation of a generational transition seems assured, everything begins to break down. After three years, the anointed successor R. Yekutiel loses his voice as a punishment for preening before gentile nobles to who come to the synagogue to hear him sing. His youngest brother R. Elyah takes over his post, but ~~his~~ R. Elyah's wife Miriam Devorah, who is the most talented musician of them all, dies of depression, despite the efforts of the healers of the day. When R. Elyah eventually makes a successful remarriage, his new wife vehemently insists that his sons never becoming professional hazzanim. And so the Wernick line of hazzanim, with so many generations of service to its credit, comes to an end.

But it is precisely from the termination of the line that the story is born. "Hahazzanim," the first of the stories, is preoccupied with the tragic story of the brilliantly creative Miriam Devorah, whose mental illness brings about the collapse of the Wernick cantorial dynasty. This is not a preoccupation that is telegraphed at the beginning of the story when the narrator lays out the exemplary life of R. Yitzhak Wernick. In his guise as chronicler and master of the pinkas, the narrator has embarked on informing us about synagogue-related occupations and offices and has chosen to begin with the hazzanim. R. Yitzhak is the fourth generation of his family to occupy that office, and the narrator is poised to continue with a narrative of succession when his project encounters unexpected obstacles and founders on rocks of anomaly and deviation. But instead of registering shock and moving the story in a different direction, the narrator delves in ever more deeply into the "deviant" instance of a pious woman who died because her voice was suppressed. He is willing to follow the outcomes wherever they lead, which is far afield from his declared task, until he brings himself up short and declares in the last line of the story, disingenuously or not, that enough is enough: "Because my sole intention is to treat of the hazzanim that served in our city, and these [the sons of Miriam Devorah] did not become

Commented [JS12]: Why call it mental illness when Agnon/narrator is unclear what the reason is? At least 4 are mentioned, and that's before the gender studies folks get their hands on the story and say she was a repressed lesbian.

Commented [JS13]: ?

hazzanim, I am taking my leave of all of them and returning to deal only with the affairs of hazzanim" (p. 84).

The narrator's willingness, even desire, to interrupt the narrative of succession and turn toward the anomalous instance enacts a moment that is not only crucial for the story at hand but paradigmatic for the entire enterprise of *Ir umelo'ah*. The narrator aspires to render a normative account of Buczacz and then quickly yields to the deviant and anomalous. Does this shift represent a commitment to truth-telling on the chronicler's part that compels him, despite his intended program, to follow the story wherever it leads? Or does it represent the narrator's unspoken intuition that when it comes to the telling of stories the normative path is ultimately too constricting and unsatisfying? Both are true, I would argue, but the second is truer. Agnon sets up his narrator as a chronicler who is both a believer and an honest broker when it comes to acknowledging deviations from the norm. Yet as author, who is a modernist and an ironist, Agnon understands, profoundly, that the possibility of story arises *only* from the deviation of the norm and that it is stories that he wants—and has only ever wanted—to tell. *Ir umelo'ah* is constituted by an armature of chronicle to which stories are attached. The moment of turning from the normative to the deviant is the quintessential narrative act that is repeated endlessly in this work. Thus, at the end of "Hahazzanim" when the narrator expresses annoyance with himself for having wandered from his avowed focus, this is not necessarily disingenuous on his part. But the author who has set him up in this role knows full well that the events surrounding the life and death of Miriam Devorah are the real story.[7]

There can be few stories more affecting than Miriam Devorah's, and it is little wonder that her fate, mentioned as a footnote to her husband's career, balloons in importance and takes over the story. She herself is the daughter of a hazzan and the sole survivor of siblings who died in childhood. She is preternaturally gifted in ways that wholly exceed the achievements of any hazzan mentioned in these stories. She inherited her father's voice, which is described as a bewitchingly flexible instrument that can imitate the sounds of the changing seasons. But a good voice is where the accomplishments of most hazzanim begin and end. Her genius lies also in composition. "She composed new melodies for prayers and piyyutim and especially for a *qerovah* for ~~Shabbat~~ Parashat Hahodesh" (p. 71). A *qerovah* is an extremely complex genre of piyyut that versifies the Amidah on special occasions; composing musical settings for it is an ambitious undertaking. She also writes words and music for use outside the synagogue service.

She composes poems, which she put to music, on the subject of the persecutions of 1648, and she composes songs to entertain children. In both cases, the narrator discloses a personal and intimate connections to these compositions. When he was a boy in the beit midrash reading a chronicle of those persecutions, an old man who identified himself as the grandson of Miriam Devorah sang one of those songs for him.[8] As for the children's songs, the narrator takes the unusual step of reproducing the full text of one of them, in both Yiddish and Hebrew, prefaced by the statement: "It seems to me that I am transmitting them according to their language" (p.72). That these songs should be circulating so many generations later such that the narrator can quote one accurately by heart is extraordinary evidence of their staying power.

Quoting her song in full is also a measure of compensation the narrator supplies for the signal rejection Miriam Devorah has suffered. Her synagogue compositions were rebuffed in the sacred arena for which they were intended. The reason is laconically given by the narrator without comment: "Her melodies were not accepted in synagogues because it was said that the voice of a woman was recognizable in them" (p. 71). "The voice of a woman" is the halakhic prohibition of *qol ishah*, which, for reasons of modesty, forbids a male to listen to a woman singing who is not a close relation.[9] But the prohibition manifestly does not apply here; Miriam Devorah's melodies are not sung by her but by male voices, presumably her husband's among other hazzanim. The male community of Buczacz has banned her melodies because of the taint of ~~femaleness~~ femininity or female origins that are presumably discoverable in the music itself. It is therefore with implicit sympathy—and perhaps with a mischievous smile--that the narrator informs us in the next sentence that these same sacred compositions achieved currency in a different venue: "However, when women were sitting together over their work, whether plucking feathers, sewing, knitting, or crocheting, they would sweeten their chores with her melodies." The circle of women at work provides a nice counterpoint to the male preserve of the synagogue, and there is some poetic justice in seeing these sacred songs being domesticated even as the domestic chores are being sanctified.

In the fashion of artists who die young, Miriam Devorah claims our attention for the manner in which her life came to an end. After having given birth to six children and composed much music, and all this while still in her twenties, Miriam Devorah contracts melancholia and dies three years later.[10] Clarifying and determining the etiology of her illness becomes the preoccupation of the narrator, who seems intent on belatedly supplying to this unfortunate young

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Commented [JS14]: I think I mentioned before:
I hadn't understood the kol-isha point to be some (crazy) chumra that extends the issur of kol isha to even songs written by a woman, but a statement about the nature of her music itself - it was too feminine. (Perhaps written to be sung in a key too high for the Hazzan?).
My presumption is that he uses the term here by way of melitza.

time soon after his unsuccessful visit to Miriam Devorah, his rest is disturbed by the depredations of bed bugs, and when he goes after them with a candle, his liquor-saturated beard is accidentally ignited and burnt up.[11] He accounts his humiliation to Miriam Devorah's curse, whereas she, having been told of his accusation, reasonably fires back that it is not she but the brandy he consumed that bears the blame.[12]

Yet despite this buffo comedy, which contrasts so sharply in tone with Miriam Devorah's deteriorating mental condition, the narrator relates with utter gravity to the diagnosis R. Mikhl delivers. Adopting the high moral ground, R. Mikhl renounces taking revenge on her because the demons (*sheidin veruḥin*) have already done so. In undertaking to unpack this cryptic statement, the narrator once again shows himself to be a man of his time, if that time is an early modern age in which mental illness is still understood in terms of possession of the soul by external hostile forces. There are both male and female demons, explains the narrator in a learned exposition, and the most incurable cases occur when female demons attach themselves to women. "It is in the nature of a man to pursue a woman," the narrator avers, "and it is not in the nature of a woman to pursue a man" (76). Having somehow transgressed these boundaries, Miriam Devorah has laid herself open to the fatal relentlessness of female possession.

R. Manli, the second healer, is ostensibly the opposite of the buffoonish ba'al shem. He is an ascetic kabbalist who has chosen to live among poor workingmen on the other side of the River Strypa. This is a community of outliers living beyond the sphere of the official prayer and study houses of the community. Although the real distance between this quarter and Buczacz proper is insignificant, it is not easy for R. Elyah, the hazzan of the main community, and his cantorial father-in-law to cross it, and they do so only at the shrewish insistence of Miriam Devorah's mother Puah, who taunts them: "Is it the Sambatyon River that separates them? It's only the Strypa!" (77). The narrator provides a detailed account of R. Manli's daily routine, which involves early-morning immersions in the river and the recitation of lengthy meditations (*kavanot*) and psalms even before morning prayers. He makes his living as a scribe, but he sells very little because each set of teffilin he writes requires the performance of extensive spiritual exercises, and he is willing to sell them only to the rare customer who meets a high bar of religious sincerity; and he prefers not to detract from the livelihood of the city's other scribes, who are not as accustomed as he to a life of poverty and renunciation. In his role as a healer, R. Manli composes amulets for people, Jews and Gentiles alike, who are suffering from disease and

affliction. He does so free of charge because of his empathy for humanity, and he writes the amulets only after carefully intuiting the nature of the affliction to be healed.

From a holy man with such impeccable sensitivities much is to be expected. The narrator encourages our hopes by treating the latticework of his esoteric beliefs with great respect and even by ventriloquizing these doctrines as if they were his own. But the build-up, alas, leads to a greater letdown. R. Manli does think deeply about Miriam Devorah's affliction, but his diagnosis, rendered with great empathy and no sarcasm, turns out to be not so different from R. Mikhl's. The problem, he determines, is the evil eye, and its source is the jealousy of other women, which has been provoked "because of her voice, which God gave her as a divine gift" (p. 78). He has a sure antidote to offer, but he knows in advance that it will seem ludicrous. His advice is to take a fish fin and hang it around the neck of the sufferer. In the face of the anticipated astonishment, he explains that the numerical value of both *snapir* (fin) and *'ayin ha'r'a* (evil eye) is four hundred and that one will work to counteract the other. The people of Miriam Devorah's household accept the prescription but delay several days, on the assumption that the fin of a fish prepared for the Sabbath will have more effectual power than one prepared for a weekday. But they were wrong, and in this short interval Miriam Devorah's "wretchedness got the better of her to the point where they feared for her life" (p. 79). In the final analysis, the ridiculousness of R. Mikhl's person is matched by the ridiculousness of R. Manli's prescription for fish-fin therapy.

Both men concur that the roots of Miriam Devorah's affliction lie in the ill will of other females, whether human or demon. And in this they are both spectacularly wrong. The narrator has already informed us that, after its rejection by synagogue culture, her music found a receptive home *only* among other women as they knitted and plucked. Why then does the narrator present the mistaken views of these two characters at such length, especially when he is about to provide psychological explanations that are much more compelling? The two healers are necessary to carry out Agnon's intention to convey to modern readers the nature of the cognitive matrix out of which Miriam Devorah's sense of herself was formed. The unfortunate young woman lives in a time in which certain kinds of endowments and certain realms of spiritual creativity are marked as male. These boundaries are reinforced by an elaborate system of esoteric doctrine controlled by special adepts and practitioners, which in turn provides a new

Commented [JS16]: Gematria only works for עין רע = 400; not HaRa.

and radical theological overlay for the received, traditional devaluation of female religiosity outside the home.

The pathos of Miriam Devorah's situation is that she is both a rebel against this set of attitudes and its unwitting victim. By realizing her musical gifts she inevitably crosses over into the preserve of male spirituality; yet, tragically, she remains prisoner to a ~~misogynist theology~~chauvanist philosophy when it comes to her own perception of her actions. The only resources available for understanding herself are the very same ones drawn on by R. Mikhl and R. Manli. She must therefore draw the conclusion that her gift is a perversion or a displacement. This is the inevitability that the narrator finally deigns to disclose to us when, after the lengthy depictions of the holy men, he informs us, briefly and almost in passing, that the "real" source of Miriam Devorah's melancholia lay in a dream three years before her death. She dreamt she was "dressed in a kittel and a large tallit as she led prayers [literally, passed before the teivah] in a synagogue filled with worshipers." (p. 79). Her response upon awakening was happiness; yet as she passed the experience through the cognitive filters available to her, the happiness gave way to dread and self-accusation. Her interpretive efforts brought her to the conclusion that in a previous life she must have been born male and that her present embodiment as a woman must be a punishment for grievous sins she committed in that earlier life. It is the fruitless search to identify those sins that plunged her into the depression from which she never emerged. The whole notion of the existence of previous lives, it should be noted, is not some stray folk belief but a doctrine called *gilgul neshamot*, the transmigration of souls, or metempsychosis; these notions are part and parcel of the theology of Lurianic kabbalah, which had been imported into Polish and Galician hasidic Jewry in the previous century. It is this body of belief, the same one that undergirds R. Mikhl and R. Manli's worldviews, from which Miriam Devorah must draw in order to construct her guilt-ridden sense of self.

The last explanation, which is presented as an adjuvant to the dream, is entirely free of theological contents. Miriam Devorah, we are told, was married while she was still a minor (younger than twelve and a half); she was homesick for her parents and sought every opportunity to flee Buczacz for her parents' village of Monastritz (?). After several years she reconciled herself to her role as a wife and bore R. Elyah six children in quick succession. Although the narrator states only the facts and draws no conclusion from them, we as modern readers are likely to construe her experience as one marked by the trauma of very early marriage and

Commented [JS17]: Misogyny is too strong here, it's more sociological. Also, this is not a theology, per se – it's not really about God, more a type of religious/cultural worldview.

Commented [JS18]: Do you mean "adjunct"? Not sure what adjuvant is.

premature and overwhelming motherhood, and all this on the shoulders of a girl born with the gifts of an artist.

As a story, "Hahazzanim" began by tracing the history of the Wernicks, the great cantorial dynasty of seventeenth-century Buczacz, and quickly turned its attention to the tragedy of Miriam Devorah. Is her story the deviation from the norm, the rock upon which the dynastic vocation of hazzanut founders? Or, as a kind of richly gifted crypto-hazzan herself, does she lay claim to be rightfully included within the class of "holy vessels" connoted by the story's title? Or, finally, as a female artist does her story mark the hidden beginnings of a new narrative, one that will be able to be told only at some future time after the breakdown of tradition, a time when Buczacz has ceased to be Buczacz?

Agnon seems contented to leave the ambiguity in place, but he does take pains to finish the story of the Wernick clan, and not simply to satisfy our curiosity. Overwhelmed by caring for his children after Miriam Devorah's death, R. Elyah marries a woman who turns out to be entirely unsympathetic and unsuitable. After divorcing her, he makes a successful match with Rivka Henyah, a woman a few years older than he who is the daughter of his older brother Yekutiel. She is a widow whose beloved husband died of wounds incurred when he tried to stop a fight between gentiles that broke out in his store. She is an excellent homemaker and parent who maintains control over this large blended family and practices a policy of equality among her own children and her step-children. Her strength compensates the children for R. Elyah's absenteeism. He has fallen under the spell of the mystical asceticism of the book *Hemdat yamim*, another outgrowth of the new spirituality that had been imported from abroad and threatened the immemorial minhagim of Buczacz.[13]

Rivka Henyah's most consequential move is to forbid her sons and step-sons from becoming professional hazzanim and to make them swear to adhere to this prohibition after her death. She insists that they and their sisters marry into mercantile families and make their livings in ways that involve no dependence on the community. They may exercise their voices as prayer leaders so long as their service is voluntary. Serving in a lay capacity as readers of Torah, they become agents of an important process of rectification.[14] "What Miriam Devorah failed to accomplish with her melodies for the liturgy and the piyyutim she succeeded in when it came to the reading of the Torah; for all the Torah readers in the city—and it goes without saying in regard to the Scroll of Esther—strove to model their chanting on what they had learned from

Miriam Devorah's sons, who learned directly from her" (83). This is Rivka Henyah's negotiated settlement. Honor given posthumously to Miriam Devorah's musical creativity is a price willingly paid for permanently decoupling the family from the enterprise of hazzanut and repositioning it within the normal—and normally admirable—course of Jewish society. They will never have to worry about the dangers of drawing close to the teivah.

HOLY CONSUMMATIONS

"Ha'ish levush habadim" [The Linen Man, 84-113], the middle panel of the cantorial triptych, is one of the most extraordinary stories in the late Agnon. Both of the main characters, a grandfather and a grandson each named Gavriel, embody an ideal of the hazzan that is found nowhere else in Agnon's works. The dramatic monologue at the center of the story, which is spoken by the grandson about the grandfather, is a marvel of narrative construction. And the act of victimization and self-sacrifice at the story's climax presents a provocative challenge both to the tale's contemporary and its modern readership. It was challenging to its author as well. Agnon published the first sixteen pages of the story (through chapter 19) in *Haaretz* in 1965[15] and left it to his daughter to add the remaining thirteen pages in manuscript and publish the whole story in *Ir umelo'ah*. Even so, the end is made up of three fragments that give the story's conclusion a provisional and unfinished quality.

The new story takes its point of departure from the ending of "Hahazzanim." The worshipers of Buczacz had been spoiled by R. Elyah's long, continuous service, and when he died at the age of 97, the teivah was left bereft. The community's resources are drained by the need to pay heavy taxes and levies, ransom prisoners, and pay brides to governing officials; there are no funds to attract a new hazzan. The descendants of Miriam Devorah have heeded her caution, and her pronouncements about the professional cantorate have been hardly encouraging to others. "Anyone who descends before the teivah, the teivah seizes hold of him and he seizes hold of the teivah," she declared. "In the end, he will lose his voice and the congregation will become disgusted with him, and yet he will not let go of the teivah and the teivah will not let go

of him" (84). In the meantime, the teivah is being abused by the assaults upon it on the part of congregants who like to hear the sound of their own voices.

The extent of the congregation's dissatisfaction is brought into sharp relief when it gets a taste of something better. On a Sabbath shortly before the High Holidays, a visiting fabric merchant is given the honor of reading the portion from the Prophets in the synagogue and then is asked to continue on by "descending before the teivah" and leading the congregation in the Musaf service. The worshipers are moved and astonished by his performance in a way unfamiliar to them. The fabric merchant has a way of erasing his own personality and facilitating the worshipers direct access to the prayers and through the prayers to God. "When R. Elyah used to pray," says one of them, "I used to hear R. Elyah," but through the agency of the visitor "all I heard was the prayer itself" (85-87). Realizing the depths of the deprivation his townsmen have been experiencing, the gabbai of the synagogue, who has been struggling to prevent the teivah from falling into chaos, prevails upon the visitor to return to Buczacz and lead services on Yom Kippur.

The visitor's name is Gavriel, as was his grandfather's after whom he was named, and the fabric he sells, and in which he is also attired, is linen. He is known in those parts as the Linen Man, *dos linen yidl* in Yiddish and *ha'ish levush habadim* in Hebrew. For the literate Hebrew reader, the epithet is familiar from a number of contexts. In the book of Daniel, a "man clad in linen" functions as an angel who vouchsafes the vision of the end of days; and in Ezekiel's prophecies he is an avenging angel charged with executing God's will. In rabbinic literature, *ha'ish levush habadim* in the Bible is associated with the ministering angel Gavriel. And in the medieval piyyut concerning the ten sages martyred by Rome, which is read in synagogues on Yom Kippur ~~afternoon~~morning, this same figure is one who knows what is taking place in heavenly spheres.[16] The name and the epithet, which identify the two Gavriels as superior, even other-worldly creatures, are just one example of series of clues or markers that prepare the reader for extraordinary events to come. For example, the reason the Linen Man comes to Buczacz every year before the High Holidays is not just to sell his wares, which he could do at any time, but because this is the season that Jews visit the graves of their ancestors and "a part" of his grandfather is buried near Buczacz. Considering why only a part of the body and not the whole suggests ominous possibilities. The grandson consistently refers to his grandfather as "*zeqeni haqadosh,*" which can mean either "my saintly grandfather" or "my sainted grandfather." On a

first reading of the story, these markers lay down a subliminal film of unease and suspense; on a second reading, the reader has the satisfying sense of having seen what is coming.

The Linen Man's service as emissary of the congregation before the teivah over the course of Yom Kippur makes a profound impression on the leadership of Buczacz. When friends of the gabbai gather at his home after the fast, they compete in praising the prayer leader and testifying to the powerful religious experiences he made possible. One says that his prayer "arouses the heart to repentance," while another goes further and claims his prayer is so persuasive that it engenders the conviction that God "has accepted our repentance, and it is not even worth mentioning the matter of sin" (87). The gabbai and his party move on to the rabbi's house, where it is universally agreed that the Linen Man should be invited to become the permanent hazzan of Buczacz. In the meantime, the Linen Man himself is carrying out the custom, rare even among the most pious, of observing a *second* day of Yom Kippur, during which he recites the entirely liturgy inaudibly to himself. After breaking his two-day fast with only a little apple wine and cake brought from home, he is ready to set out on his several-hour walk back in darkness to his village. At that moment he is accosted by the shamash, who has been sent to bring him to the gabbai's home. There he is presented with a bag of gold coins as payment for his services, which he promptly refuses to accept.[17] His refusal is incomprehensible to the practical men who sit before him. If he is concerned that the money comes from charitable donations ~~in the presence of the Torah~~ pledged in the synagogue, he is reassured that it comes from the Gabbai's personal funds. If he is concerned that the money may have come from questionable business dealings, he is reassured of the Gabbai's unassailable integrity in all commercial matters. In explanation of his refusal all he can say is: "My name is Gavriel and I am named for my sainted grandfather R. Gavriel" (89). His pragmatic-minded listeners fail to see the relevance of his statement and demand to be told what about his grandfather would contribute to his refusal.

This is a critical moment in the story that illuminates the nature of each party. The gabbai and his associates believe that they will humor the meek and inarticulate Linen Man by listening patiently to a sentimental anecdote about his grandfather; all the while they are eager to get on to the business of signing him up as the community's permanent hazzan. They do not have the least notion that their prodding will unleash a major narrative whose telling will last until the morning hours and leave them disturbed and confused. For his part, their prodding,

Commented [JS19]: See fuller treatment of this motif in Agnon's "Pi Shnayim" in Samukh venire.

wholly unbeknownst to them, sets the stage for the great moment of his life: the telling of his grandfather's story. This is an opportunity that has long eluded him; or, perhaps more accurately, he has eluded it. He is awed by the responsibility and utters a prayer for himself: "Let my words be acceptable to the He who opens the mouth of the dumb" (90). If the Linen Man is not dumb, he is diffident and unused to speaking, and it takes a great deal for him to screw up his courage and get launched on his story. To overcome his hesitation, his listeners piously observe that it is a religious duty to recount the praises of tsaddikim. The Linen Man responds with a qualification.

> It is indeed a religious duty to recount the praises of tsaddikim but only if the recounting of those praises results in deeds like those of the tsaddikim. I, for my sins, have no deeds to show. All I have is the story of the deeds of my sainted grandfather, for whom I am named. Many times I've told the story of his deeds, but only to myself. Now that you ask me to tell you the story of my sainted grandfather, the words rise up to my lips and seek to come out. (90)

Although it is likely lost on his listeners, the Linen Man is making an important statement whose significance, like the markers mentioned above, can only be appreciated after hearing his story in full. He exists in the shadow of his grandfather, who was a man of deeds (*ma'aseh*). He himself has nothing to show *except* for the telling of his grandfather's story, the telling of his deeds, which he has not yet realized. The act of narration--in the grand, masterful and potent way he brings it off—represents his one chance to perform a deed and enter the realm of *ma'aseh*. Only later will we realize that this act is coterminous with his life and that, once it is completed, so will be his existence.

It is worth pausing to appreciate the artistry of the great monologue that follows and takes up almost all of the remainder of this long story. The modest and laconic fabric seller turns out to be a master of exposition and scene setting who knows how to retard the action to create interest and to return to the same scene from different angles. In the scope and ambition of his story, he compares to the shamash in "Hamashal vehanimshal" [The Parable and Its Lesson], who narrates his journey to Ginnom and back. The shamash, by contrast, is giving an account of events in which he himself participated, even if those events took place more than a half

century earlier, and he has an ulterior motive for telling his story, which is to exonerate himself before a court assembled to judge him. The Linen Man addresses an audience that is more sympathetic but no less demanding that its curiosity be satisfied. His challenge is to overcome the fact that he never met his grandfather, and he presents a rationale derived from his grandmother's practice for empathically imagining thoughts and feelings and placing them within his characters. For both the shamash and the Linen Man, the biggest compliment paid them is the fact that the narrator of *Ir umelo 'ah* shows himself willing to hand over to them the baton of narration and willing to share the stage with them.

The Linen Man is filled with trepidation because he knows that the story he will tell that night will be the most important performance of his life and that once he has delivered it he will have discharged his purpose for living. The way Agnon has shrewdly structured the story makes it clear that it is the phenomenon of performance that underlies and connects the three central spheres of action. Within the context of a series of stories about hazzanim, the appearance of the hazzan before the audience and before the teivah is obviously the preeminent paradigm for performance. The second is the Linen Man's canny construction of his monologue, delivered as the performance of a lifetime. Less evident but equally performative is the third: the martyrdom of R. Gavriel. What is most astonishing about his ordeal is not the gruesomeness of the tortures and execution visited upon him but his success in gaining control of his situation and using it to exhibit his faith. From Second Maccabees to the Roman executions of the Sages, the goal of martyrs has been to demonstrate the superiority of their convictions in the face of their dominators. The subversive truth of the story is that for both Gavriels, grandfather and grandson, there is something insufficient in the calling of the hazzan, and they succeed in finding the consummate performance of their lives elsewhere.

The story the Linen Man tells of his grandfather is a narrative of a gifted and studious youth who grows into a paragon of righteousness until something happens to make him falter. Born with a voice that comes along only once in a century, Gavriel is adopted by the old hazzan and asked to serve in his place after his death. When a servant of the community—this is not Buczacz but a considerably smaller town--attempts to pay him for his services after his first cycle of holiday performances, he peremptorily rejects the payment and says that he fortunately does need to depend on the community. His refusal is supported by his young wife Rivkah Devorah and his father-in-law, in whose home the couple lives according to the customary

arrangement. Thus the pattern is set: Gavriel undertakes to lead the community in prayer without payment; he rejects the title "hazzan," which would imply a remunerated professional role, and prefers to be known simply as Gavriel *ba'al tefilah*, Gavriel the Prayer Leader. He and his wife start a family and establish their own household, and Rivkah Devorah opens a shop and proves herself an able businesswoman. Gavriel is given the freedom to pursue a life of holiness; he spends his days learning in the beit midrash and teaching a daily public lesson on the Mishnah, and the Sabbaths and holidays he leads the congregation in prayer. The only time he has contact with money is Friday afternoons when he helps his wife set aside their tithe for charity. Although the fame of his voice attracts lucrative approaches from larger communities, he declines all offers.

Into the perfection of this life inevitably come sources of instability. Gavriel's situation invites comparison to that of Job's, although there are no overt references linking them. It is only after his martyrdom that the bewildered elders of the generation are forced to conclude that Gavriel had provoked Satan's envy because the sincerity of his prayer led his congregants to thoughts of repentance (111). From first to last, the story of Gavriel's martyrdom unfolds with the inevitability of tragedy.[18] The ostensible precipitant is a trivial accident. The wagon of a bookseller on his way to a major convocation of sages loses a wheel on its journey through the small town; while he waits for the repairs to be completed, he is prevailed upon to display his wares in the beit midrash. Among the books is a handsome printing of *Torat ha'olah* (published in Prague in 1570) by Moses Isserles, one of the greatest scholars of his age. The treatise describes the dimensions of the various precincts of the Temple and explicates the details of the sacrifices according to the teachings of the Kabbalah. Gavriel experiences an overwhelming desire to acquire this expensive volume, and all his troubles soon begin to unfold from his efforts to do so.

The powerful connection to ~~*Torah*~~ *Torat ha'olah* does not come from nowhere. In his own studies Gavriel had always adhered to the curriculum favored by the rabbinic elite, which focused on the study of Talmud with the commentaries of Rashi and the Tosafists. He prepared studiously for the lessons in Mishnah that he gave as a communal service, and he studied the commentaries on the piyyutim in advance of each holiday. He avoided esoteric speculation, heeding the Talmud's advice (quoting Ben Sira~~h~~): "Inquire not into what is marvelous and in what is hidden from you do not seek" (97).[19] Yet without seeking it, hidden knowledge is

Commented [JS20]: Does it? Aside from his bad end, how does it compare?

Commented [JS21]: Why inevitable? In that chapter on tragedy in Ariel's book he makes a point of showing inevitability is in Greek tragedy, not nec Jewish. He also has an essay in a collection somewhere asking if Iyov is even technically "tragedy" in the classical sense of that genre. I can find exact source for that if you need.

revealed to him in a series of dreams. In one he is shown the secret correspondence between the structure of the Jerusalem Temple and the structure of the cosmos; in another he is told that the seven-stringed harp of King David will have eight strings in the time of the Messiah and ten strings in the World to Come. Shortly afterwards he is vouchsafed a waking vision of R. Amnon of Mainz, the medieval martyr who composed the famous hymn "Unetaneh toqef," a centerpiece of the High Holiday liturgy.[20]

When Gavriel peruses the bookseller's copy of *Torat ha'olah*, he is stunned to discover that some of the same secret insights that had come to him unbidden are found in a work by a great sage whose authority is accepted by almost all communities.[21] The confirmation of his private visions by such an august authority is an overwhelming feeling, and he realizes that the book before him would open up vastly more secret knowledge about the Temple and it rituals, knowledge that he was on his way to discovering on his own. He undergoes at that moment a life-changing experience: "He passionately desired the precious volume with which he could delight his holy soul" (97). The word for "desired" is *hashaq*, a strong term with an erotic connotation, and the word for "delight" is *lesha'ashei'a*, a term similarly connected to notions of giving and taking pleasure. Gavriel experiences for the first time the desire to possess something he does not have and until now did not know was missing in his life, and which, if acquired, will bring him joy. When he returns home, his wife observes that his demeanor has changed, and after she extracts from him the reason, ~~why~~ she proposes to empty her cash reserves in order to buy the book. Gavriel, who has never held money in his hands except for purposes of charity, takes the coins the next day to the bookseller only to ~~find out~~discover that the volume has been sold to someone else.

Gavriel gets a second chance, and its source tells a great deal about how his desire for the book is linked to the world of the synagogue. A worshiper approaches him on the night of Simhat Torah and reports that Gavriel's chanting of the prayer for rain in the morning service had brought him much pleasure (*'oneg*); he identifies himself as the person who purchased *Torat ha'olah* and offers to ~~relinquish~~ sell it as thanks for the pleasure given him, that is, if he still desires (*mit'aveh*) it. When he approaches the teivah the next morning to lead the Mussaf service, he is stricken by the thought that he would likely not be able to afford the purchase price of the book and he becomes physically weak. His changed behavior is immediately notice by those who are used to saying that "R. Gavriel's prayer gives them Sabbath pleasure (*'oneg*) on

the Sabbath and holiday joy (*simḥah*) on holidays" (98). Some observes write off his weakness to the sustained pressure of performing during the holiday season. Others point to worries stemming from his bourgeoning family and their limited income in the aftermath of his father-in-law's death. Is it any wonder, they reason, that "if he has no pleasure (*ta'anug*)" he has none to give others?

Synagogue worship emerges here as a place in which spiritual pleasure has become commodified. The worshipers rely upon the powers of the hazzan or the *ba'al tefilah* to create a euphoric experience they are not capable of sustaining on their own; they long to be transported beyond themselves. The congregants realize how much they take their pleasure for granted only when Gavriel's powers momentarily falter; if Agnon's tales of the hazzanim tell us anything, it is that there are innumerable obstacles to this exchange succeeding and the consumers of Gavriel's services are lucky indeed. In the frame story about Buczacz and the Linen Man, the gabbai deploys all his wiles to pursue the visitor because he knows too well the rude and contentious state of a congregation chronically deprived of pleasure.

Commented [JS22]: Which Gavriel? The Linen man or his grandfather?

If it is true that the hazzan must experience pleasure in order to give it to others, then what sources can he draw upon for his own happiness? In Gavriel's case, standing in the sacred space close to the teivah and serving as an emissary before God would seem to be satisfaction enough. That is until his dreams and his discovery of a book that give him a taste of something more profound and satisfying. *Torat 'olah* opens up for him a trove of secret lore about the Temple and its sacrifices and promise an unmediated route to transcendence. The synagogue and its liturgy are the "service of the heart" that the Rabbis instituted after the Destruction to substitute for the sacrifices offered by the priests. ~~Yet despite~~ To be sure the Rabbis' insistence ~~that~~ a marvelous loss. this priestless oral worship found as much favor in God's eyes as what it replaced; the loss of a sense of direct proximity to God was never fully dispelled. Gavriel, who craves service to God, is the apotheosis of the true hazzan, but his quest for holiness is circumscribed by the substitute nature of the very regime of synagogue worship. It is as if he has hit a wall and can go no farther. *Torat ha'olah* gives him the promise of unfettered access to the innermost secrets of the originary, prelapsarian site of divine worship. With such a prospect in view, why would he not be passionately desirous of obtaining this tome? Yet it is crucial to note that even such esoteric pleasures have their limits. The access offered to the world of the Temple is only speculative and theosophical. It allows for the luxuriating of the mystical imagination, but it does not, it

goes without saying, bring back the act of sacrifice itself. But the absence of that possibility does not mean that one cannot long for it, and immersion in the lore of the Temple only stokes the desire to transcend even this barrier. When Gavriel's chance comes along, as we shall soon see, he is not insensible to its possibilities.

Until this point, the story has been told with such brisk economy that it is easy to forget that it is a monologue being spoken before an audience. The teller calls little attention to himself, and the story flows. Beginning with Chapter 19 (p. 99), however, there is a palpable shift. Time dilates, and ten pages are devoted to three hours of real time. The Linen Man makes his role as narrator conspicuous as he announces and justifies his choices to lavish attention on some scenes and not on others. He indulges in a long apologia for the freedom he takes in dramatizing conversations and feelings whose only source is his empathic imagination. (This passage [p. 102] was discussed in Chapter 3.) He returns several times to the same touching picture of his grandfather replacing the water in which he is preserving a precious etrog. He give us two renditions of the crucial meeting between Gavriel and R. Eliezer Simḥah, the gabbai of the synagogue. Interpolated digressions create suspense and retard the action. Taken together, all these effects have a distinctly cinematic quality. It is as if the narrator has finished with the exposition and now focuses his attention on setting up the climactic scene.

A BURNT OFFERING UNTO THE LORD

The sudden introduction of R. Eliezer Simḥa is an important part of this shift. A story that has so far focused on the two Gavriels makes room in midcourse for another character. He is as exemplary in his own sphere as Gavriel is in his. A man of great intelligence who could have been an eminent scholar, R. Eliezer Simḥa chose instead to represent the interests of the Jewish communities of the region before the governing authorities and, within the community, to serve as a mediator in disputes among powerful rival mercantile families. Like Gavriel, he has often been invited to establish his residence in larger and more influential cities. He has refused because the Jews of their town, of which there are only two hundred, possess the highly uncommon quality of dwelling together in peace. It is he who explains to the wholly unworldly

Gavriel the current interregnum in the governance of the Polish monarchy, which, in the absence of a monarch, has allowed Jewish communities to decline paying the Shpilowka, a tax that funds the queen's jewels. It is the existence of this unexpected windfall that he uses to breakdown Gavriel's resistance to accept a sum of money from the community for his services during the High Holiday period that has just ended. R. Eliezer Simha's purpose is not to corrupt Gavriel. He was witness to Gavriel's faltering performance in the synagogue the day before and took to heart the presumptions—mistaken, as it turns out—that it was due to anxieties about livelihood. Little did he know that the roll of coins he places in Gavriel's hands will be used in the next few hours to buy a book. The substance of R. Eliezer Simha's own fortune will soon be depleted by the lavish bribes he lays out, unsuccessfully, to persuade the Polish authorities to ameliorate the harsh conditions of Gavriel's incarceration and to avert his execution.

Gavriel takes the money and sets off to the house of Gershon Wolff, the wealthy manufacturer who had purchased *Torah ha'olah* and then offered to sell it to Gavriel in gratitude for the spiritual pleasure he had provided him. It is exactly at this point, at the beginning of Chapter 25 and in the middle of p. 107, that the great monologue spoken by the grandson breaks off. Anticipating the first light of morning, the Linen Man announces a break in the narration for the purpose of morning prayers. That he does so an hour earlier than necessary, a fact pointed out by his listeners, is due either to his practice of spending an hour in private meditation before the arrival of the statutory time for communal prayer or to an uncertainty as to the resumption of the monologue. It is now (p. 108) that the general narrator of the story returns to the stage—relinquished on p. 91--and takes over, and he offers a fascinating rationale for doing so. He begins by admitting that he does not know when the story was resumed, and he lists a number of reasons, mostly bearing on the requirements of the holiday of Sukkot, for why it is implausible that Gavriel continued telling the story after services that morning or any time soon after. Concerning this problem, the narrator can only throw up his hands and admit that "there are difficulties in the world that it is not in our power to resolve." (When it comes to irresolvable difficulties, this one will soon pale in comparison to the challenge presented by Gavriel's torture and execution, and the troubling persistence of unanswered questions will be raised again.) The narrator is constrained to explain that the monologue he has conveyed so far is based on a chain of transmission that goes back directly to the men who heard the Linen Man's account in the rabbi's house. In the concluding five pages of the story, however, his source of authority is less

Commented [JS23]: Rabbi or Gabbai?

direct and derives from "those who were stirred by [the example of] the Linen Man to expound upon the events in the life of the sainted R. Gavriel."

Even though the voice telling the story has changed, the cinematic quality of the narrative remains vivid. This is the chronicle of a death foretold. Gavriel places the money before Gershon Wolff, refuses an invitation to take refreshment, takes possession of the book, and begins his journey home from the non-Jewish section of the town, where the wealthy manufacturer lives. Skirting a noisy crowd of gentile townspeople, Gavriel is suddenly pointed to with the cry "He's the one!" and then set upon and severely beaten and then taken off to jail. The narrator supplies the back story to this astonishing turn of events. The wife of the church sexton has discovered thefts from the holy bread it is her duty to bake, and it is soon discovered that the thief is none other than that the jealous and gluttonous mother of the sexton's deceased first wife. To deflect guilt from herself, the crone claims that a spell was cast upon her by a Jewish wizard, and she has the good fortune of seeing at that very moment R. Gavriel walk by, with a big tome in hand. The crowd attacks him and he is imprisoned. His imprisonment lasts two and a half years, at the end of which he is tied to a horse and dragged through the streets of the town and then cut into pieces before the eyes of a genteel audience assembled for the spectacle.

Every aspect of Gavriel's treatment is incredible. After the heat of the moment, the gentile townspeople come to realize that the case against the pious Jew is bogus. They know Gavriel to be a holy man and his wife to be an admirable shopkeeper who deals fairly with all her customers. They know the mother-in-law of the sexton's first wife to be a harridan. Moreover, even in a Polish legal system hostile toward Jews, since when can a few monetary favors not influence officials to do the right thing, especially when the charges are already so obviously flimsy? Yet no amount of ~~brides~~ bribes can lessen the torture or avert the death sentence. R. Eliezer Simhah mortgages his home and impoverished himself trying, but to no avail.

Gavriel's fate is altogether outrageous, but the story cannily diverts ~~out~~ our attention from the aspect that is most provocative. Modern readers will undoubtedly be appalled and indignant at the baseless victimization of an innocent Jew. Gavriel's contemporaries, more inured to such persecutions, are described in the story as being troubled by the problem of theodicy it poses. What can explain God's allowing a man of such exemplary piety and righteousness to be

Commented [JS24]: Genteel or Gentile?

Commented [JS25]: Your transliterations of names are inconsistent.

subjected to unspeakable torments and even denied a Jewish burial? "All the sages of the generation struggled with this dilemma until they came to the conclusion that Satan had become jealous of him because his prayers had aroused stirrings of repentance in the hearts of the worshipers" (111).[22] Is this the story of a holy man who falls prey to the sin of cupidity? The modern readers too may struggle with a secularized version of theodicy that derives from an expectation of moral economy in literature. We bridle against the disproportion between Gavriel's minor transgression and the horrific consequences visited upon him.

Commented [JS26]: Isn't "cupidity" way too strong for what he experiences? He wanted a book (and for rather pure motives at that).

Yet these are all distractions and false leads placed before us by the narrator at the conclusion of this long story. What is truly radical, and radically disturbing, is not the persecutions but Gavriel's response to them. His radiant happiness increases in proportion to the severity of the tortures meted out to him. When his wife Rivkah Devorah is finally allowed to visit him in prison, a privilege for which R. Eliezer Simhah has had to leverage vast amounts of political and monetary assets, she is aghast at what she sees. Bound by iron shackles, his battered and emaciated body peeps from among the tears in his soiled garment. But in response to her shriek, which shakes the walls and startles prisoners and guards alike, Gavriel comforts her by saying

> Why are you weeping and why do you distress yourself? Is it not, after all, for my glory that I have been placed here, and is it not for the glory of He of whom it is said "The earth is full of His glory"? You might truly protest that it is impossible to observe the mitsvot in such a filthy place. But the Rabbis, of blessed memory, have already ruled that under conditions of coercion the Torah absolves one of the requirement to observe the commandments. I trust in Him about whom it is said "His mercies extend to all His works" that He will view my presence here as equivalent to my sitting in the synagogues and the beit midrash. (105)

Is Gavriel a holy fool such that he can remain wholly insensible to torture and a take a growing delight in his ordeal? If his behavior is a wonderment to his coreligionists, it becomes an object of veneration for the Christian prisoners, who consider abandoning their faith and clinging to the God of Israel, who is the source of Gavriel's luminous strength. It is this fear that hastens the priests in charge of his torture to bring his ordeal to its end.

Gavriel's delight in suffering turns out to be the real scandal. As moderns we are less greatly troubled by gratuitous suffering allowed by God than we are by the embrace and beatification of suffering, especially after the Holocaust ~~and the willed establishment of the state of Israel~~. The key to Gavriel's mentality can be found in the admission that he makes to Rivka Devorah when she visits him in prison. "All my life I placed before my eyes those tsaddikim who martyred themselves for the sake of Heaven by means of their death. The day that I went to purchase the book *Torat ha'olah* I could barely stand because of the intensity of my desire to offer myself as a burnt offering before God" (106). The articulation of this passionate desire for self-sacrifice activates two symbolic contexts which, together, help to explain why Gavriel's ordeal renders him ecstatic and others dumbfounded. The first symbolic context is the persecutions of 1096 in the Rhineland Valley community of Worms, Mainz and Speyer during which Crusader soldiers presented Jews with the choice of conversion or death. Many pious and learned Jews chose to kill themselves after slaughtering their families rather than convert. These ritual homicides and suicides went far beyond anything required in Talmudic sources regarding behavior under conditions of persecution. In the piyyutim written to extol their behavior, the standard rationales for collective suffering based on sin and punishment had to be put aside in light of the unimpeachable righteousness of the martyrs. Instead, an older rabbinic notion that had previously applied only to individual suffering was now extended to collective suffering. This is concept of *yisurin shel ahavah*, affliction that is motivated by love. According to this doctrine, as amplified by the sacred poets of the time, suffering of the martyrs of 1096 was not a punishment but an opportunity for spiritual distinction awarded them in recognition of their superior virtue. The martyrs chose to kill their family members and themselves rather than *being* killed by the enemy because they sought to control the conditions under which they themselves became sacrifices to God that not only resembled the wholly burnt sacrifices in the Temple, the *'olot*, but became them in fact. The ecstatic transcendence that accompanied their deeds expressed the joy of their offering being accepted. Living in the Exile, they felt acutely the distance and remoteness from God imposed by the Destruction and the abrogation of the concrete and embodied means by which direct service to God was offered and direct absolution obtained. Seizing the moment of their martyrdom allowed them to collapse the thousand-year gap that intervened between them and the Temple and, if only for a moment, to make the sacrificial milieu real again.

Commented [JS27]: What's State of Israel got to do with it?

Commented [JS28]: You haven't explained that an "Olah" is a burnt offering – i.e., the book title isn't random.

Commented [JS29]: Where do you get this idea? Is it yours (from your Churban book?) It's not 100% convincing to me that this is their state of mind.

Gavriel's martyrdom is modeled on these precedents but it is distinguished by his vocation as hazzan. This is the second symbolic context. As prayer leader, he is called upon to serve both the congregation and God. But the service he provides the congregation is not identical with the service he offers to God. His congregants rely on him to "facilitate" their religious experience by arousing them to repentance during the Days of Awe and providing them joy on the great pilgrimage festivals. Gavriel's own awe and joy come from a different direction: from the teivah he faces rather than from the worshippers seated behind him. The role of prayer leader affords him the chance not only for representation but for presence. His stance before the teivah is the privileged space granted him to draw closer to God. But the closer he is the closer he wishes to be. Although he leads a life of study and devotion that would seem exemplary to all accounts, he himself experiences the limitations imposed by an attenuated regime of worship that is a replacement for the visceral and embodied service of the Temple in which God's presence dwelt. The service of the heart, *ha'avodah shebalev*, is not enough. Gavriel's passionate desire to acquire *Torah ha'olah* represents as longing to overcome this barrier through theosophical meditation. Attaining secret knowledge of the innermost dimensions of the Sanctuary and the high spiritual meanings of its sacrificial ritual is a great attainment, yet, in the last analysis, it remains only that, an illumination that takes places in the individual spiritual imagination. It is ironic, then, that Gavriel has possessed the longed-for book only a few minutes before his attack, which opens the way for him to skip over the stage of reading and meditating and proceed directly to the higher opportunity of making himself into a direct and embodied sacrifice to the Lord.[23]

The figure of R. Amnon of Mainz is the bridge between these two symbolic contexts. According to medieval legend, R. Amnon is the author of the famous prayer "Unetaneh toqef" ["Let us now tell of the power of the day. . ."], which describes the awesomeness of the Day of Judgment and is one of the most solemn moments in the liturgy for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The legend tells that in the eleventh century the Bishop of Mainz attempted to convert R. Amnon to Christianity and that R. Amnon asked for three days to consider his course of action. Immediately he regretted giving the appearance that he was wavering and failed to appear before the bishop. When the bishop had the rabbi brought before him, the rabbi pleaded that his tongue be cut out because it had expressed doubt in his

Judaism. Instead, the bishop cut off his hands and feet. Rabbi Amnon begged to be brought to the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah together with his severed limbs, and just as the reader was beginning the Kedushah prayer, he intoned the hymn that was to become so famous.[24] The figure of R. Amnon makes three appearances in "Ha'ish levush habadim." The first, which has already been alluded to, occurs on Rosh Hashanah shortly after Gavriel contracts his desire to acquire *Torat ha'olah*, when R. Amnon appears to him and conveys the original melody in which the hymn was composed (98). The second occurs as he walks across the town to purchase the book from Gershon Wolff; he remembers how, upon completing the intoning of his hymn, R. Amnon "disappeared from the world before all because the Lord had taken him" (106). The third is related after his death by his wife, who, after describing how Gavriel had expressed the desire to be a sacrifice (*'olah*) before God, says "my heart tells me that on that day R. Amnon was revealed to him" (106).[25]

In addition to fusing the worlds of martyrdom and liturgy, the figure of R. Amnon makes it clear how profoundly and demonstrably Gavriel does not belong to his time. All the circumstances surrounding his imprisonment, torture and death are not only incredible but anachronistic. The drama of Gavriel's consummation belongs to the eleventh century and not to the seventeenth or the beginning of the eighteenth, and it belongs to the ancient communities of the Ashkenaz and not to the more recent communities of Galicia. Even during the Hmelnitki massacres of 1648, instances of sacrificial suicide and homicide were rare. Now several generations later, in a very different political climate, behavior based on this model is out of place. The rationale for self-sacrifice has been forgotten, and therefore Gavriel's ecstatic transcendence in his torture seems incomprehensible and theologically troubling, even scandalous. It is the reader-listeners of the story who remain uncomfortable, whether they belong the narratorial audience contemporary to the time of the story or to the authorial audience of post-Hololocaust Israeli literature. It is only for Gavriel himself that his passion makes rapturous sense.

Some of the same confusion attaches to the fate of the gifted narrator who recounts the first Gavriel's story. Shortly after the holiday season, a traveler from Buczacz passes by the village of the Linen Man and pauses in his journey to seek him out. It happens that on that very day the Linen Man, who is called by his fellow villagers "Yedid Hashem" [Beloved of God], has decided to return his soul to God, despite being in good health. He wraps himself in his tallit,

Commented [JS30]: Sp.

recites the confessional, summons his brethren, and, with the words of the Song of Songs on his lips, departs the world. His motives remain a mystery, and those who were privileged to have heard him descend before the teivah speculate that he has been called to join the heavenly choir." These final words of the story invite us to see an analogy between the final "consummations" of grandfather and grandson. The latter's self-willed death is a paler and belated version of the former's operatic martyrdom. The grandson returns his soul to God after accomplishing the great, long-deferred task of his life: telling the story of his grandfather. It will be recalled that, when the grandson was being egged on by the curious Buczacz notables to tell that story, he states that recounting the deeds of the righteous is a mitzvah only if the act of telling leads to deeds. *His* deed is that very act of telling, and, having accomplished it, he is now free to disentangle himself from dilemmas of serving before the teivah in this world and to sing God's praises in the choir in the next.

"FIRST AS TRAGEDY, THEN AS FARCE"

The third panel of the cantorial triptych abandons the rarified holiness of the Linen Man and his sainted grandfather to bring us into the world of ordinary hazzanim, which, despite its workaday immersion in money and status, remains a dangerous place. The third story is simply called "Hahazzanim, hemshekh" [The Hazzanim, Continued, 113-21], as if it is a continuation of the first story, "Hahazzanim" about Miriam Devorah and R. Elyah. There is no small irony in the fact that its protagonist is *also* named Gavriel despite the extreme difference between his nature and that of the two Gavriels who preceded him. Already in the opening paragraph of the story we are plunged into an account of hazzanut that is very this-worldly; this is a picture of hazzanut as a profession rather than a spiritual calling. In his chronicler voice, the narrator informs us that by general custom hazzanim are released from the duties to their home congregations between Passover and Shavuot and allowed to make guest appearances in other communities in order to supplement their incomes. It is also an opportunity for hazzanim to

advertise themselves and be looked at for new positions. Their employment, like that of rabbis, operates under conditions of an unregulated free market, and there is nothing that prevents a successful hazzan from being poached by a community that can offer him better terms. We are further informed about the typical career path of a hazzan. He begins his training as a boy singer in the private choir of an established hazzan; with luck when he is older he becomes an associate hazzan in a community (*hazzan sheni*); and finally he becomes a hazzan on his own. This has been the path followed by Gavriel, the hazzan of Kamenets Podol'skii, who arrives with his choir to spend a Shabbat performing in Buczacz.[26] His Buczacz appearance turns out to be a great success. He is held over for a second week, and Saturday evening after shabbat the community leaders are enthralled when the troupe gives a heart-rending version of a hymn that tells the story of the fortunes of a pious but impoverished believer. On the spot Gavriel is offered the position of hazzan of Buczacz, a post that has lain vacant for many years.

Gavriel's triumph turns to dust when the terms offered him become clearer. He has badly misread the situation and assumed that because of its august reputation Buczacz is a wealthy community that can easily sustain the expenses not only of a hazzan but also his choir. But as we the readers know from the beginning of the previous story, the community's resources have indeed been badly depleted by oppressive taxes and sums laid out to ransom captives, and paying the salary of a hazzan alone is already a significant challenge. Taking the choir with the hazzan is out of the question. Yet what is evident as an unfortunate but necessary reality is experienced by Gavriel as fraud and chicanery of the worst kind. Promises had been made—at least in his mind—and then flagrantly violated. His feeling of betrayal is exacerbated by the defection of his bass singer Menasheh, who is recruited by a visiting leader of a neighboring community for the dual position of hazzan and husband to his widowed sister. Gavriel's response to these setbacks reveals much not only about himself but also about hazzanut as a profession. He is consumed by rage. He threatens to bring the community to court, until a sympathizer convinces him that this would be a futile effort. He and the members of his troupe parade through the streets of Buczacz barefoot to dramatize the unfairness done to them. He heaps abuse upon Buczacz and calls his troupe together to make a preemptory and contemptuous departure from the city only to find that no wagoner, Jew or gentile, will provide him with transportation, leaving him a humiliated prisoner in a city he reviles.

Gavriel's antics, it is implied, are part and parcel of the self-absorbed theatrics of the profession he practices. Like the maestros and prima donnas of the great age of opera, hazzanim are by nature monsters of ego and grandiosity despite their ability to make angelic music. The first two Gavriels were exceptional creatures who occupied the highest register of hazzanut as a sacred vocation; the belated, third Gavriel, alas, represents the norm. But rather than simply establishing that fact and leaving us with a caricature of the hazzan as a puffed up performer, "Hahazzanim, hemsheikh" tells the story of Gavriel's transformation into a complex figure worthy of our respect and pity.

Commented [JS31]: This is an over-statement. You can't say such a thing about all hazzanim, esp after the portraits Agnon has painted about the exceptions to this description.

One of the agents of Gavriel's change is none other than Buczacz itself. When Gavriel finally procures transport out of the city, he hears the wagoner singing in a pleasant voice one of the Sabbath melodies that he had performed during his stay in Buczacz. The wagoner suddenly stops his tune and when Gavriel asks why, he is told that the melody was so vivid in the wagoner's mind that he thought it was the Sabbath and was suddenly seized with fear that he was transgressing the law by driving his wagon. As the wagoner continues to sing more of the Gavriel's melodies, the hazzan's anger begins to subside and he allows the wagoner to give him an account of the history of the hazzanut in Buczacz going back hundreds of years to the earliest of the Wernick family, to R. Elyah's seventy-year tenure as hazzan, and to the story of the Gavriels, whose rejection of compensation for cantorial services this Gavriel finds incomprehensible. When the wagoner politely declines to sing some of the melodies of those hazzanim, Gavriel turns to the members of his troupe and says in a tone in which admiration overcomes sarcasm, "Have you ever in your life seen people as well-mannered as the people of Buczacz, who refuse to sing the melody of another hazzan in my presence?" (116). His begrudging admiration reminds us of how the people of Buczacz reacted to his invectives and accusations. Rather than responding in kind, they refused to be provoked, they offered him some funds to help him place his charges in other cantorial choirs, and the good women of the town responded with empathy at the sight of the barefoot choristers.

It is in fact for the purpose of marrying one of these good women that Gavriel returns to Buczacz two years later. As a matter of principle, the narrator declines to track what befell him during that interval because it lies outside the subject of Buczacz and its hazzanim. What happens outside Buczacz apparently stays outside Buczacz. And what happened to him must have been substantial and extreme because when he reappears he is so utterly transformed that at

first people don't believe it is the same person. "R. Gavriel was demanding, ill-tempered and irascible, whereas this person speaks peaceably and amiably to everyone" (116-17). The reasons for his transformation are mysterious; to be sure, we are informed that his wife has died, but it is implied that the real agent of change, or at least the catalyst for it, is Buczacz and its manners. Gavriel's unnamed second wife embodies what is best about the town. She is competent, well mannered, expert in the Bible, pious and possesses a good sense of humor (117). Because she is disinclined to move to Kamenets Podol'skii, Gavriel gives up his post there and, without position or standing, lives with her amiably in Buczacz. Soon, he invited to pray before the teivah for the High Holidays, and eventually he is formally made hazzan of the community, this time with no histrionics on his part. There are some reminders of his old pride; he refuses to flatter the rich and odious at weddings and circumcisions ceremonies, a behavior to which the narrator gives a wink of ~~aproval~~approval. But all considered he acquits himself admirably.

Suddenly, after five years of service as hazzan, Gavriel recuses himself and resigns his position. "From that moment on he did not draw near to the teivah or pass before the teivah even on the anniversaries of the deaths of his father and mother" (118). This abrupt and harsh self-imposed severance from his profession, the narrator informs us, is the result of a series of three bad dreams. The first two are neutralized by the comforting interpretations of his friends, but the third, which he reveals to no one until he is on his deathbed, proves his undoing. The first dream finds him leading public prayers on Yom Kippur when his tsitsiyot, the fringes of this tallit, fly away from him eight time as he tries to gather them up during the Ahavah Rabbah prayer. His friends convince that the dream cannot be probative because that prayer belongs to the morning service, which is not one conducted by the hazzan on Yom Kippur. The second dream also occurs on Yom Kippur. This time he is a boy serving in the choir of the hazzan of Lublin when he is struck on the forehead by the master and rebuked for not wearing his tefilin. Again, his friends argue that the dream has no real power because tefilin are not worn on Yom Kippur and at the time he was a minor who does not yet don tefilin. He is somewhat heartened until he is felled by the third dream.

The third dream is the one that recurs eight nights in a row.

> When he served as the associate hazzan in the Jewish community of Ustraah in the great synagogue and stood before the teivah during the morning service on

> the first day of Rosh Hashanah, a cannon that had been suspended in the synagogue from the days of Khmielnitki fell on his mahzor and on the teivah, which sunk into the ground from the force of the impact. He heard a kind of voice speaking, saying: "All this is the result of your actions." (118)

This time he does not allow his friends to explain away the baleful implication of the dream—he does not even tell them--because he knows that there is no comfort that can be given. He becomes a penitent, resigns his position and never again under any circumstances approaches the teivah. (He does, however, continue to be vigilant concerning the exacting standards of the teivah; the slightest error in pronunciation or melody made by a prayer leader is sure to provoke his visible disapprobation.) This is a mortifying dream under any circumstance but all the more so in an epistemic world in which dreams are not projections of the unconscious but communications from heaven. The narrator offers no interpretation of the dream, but none in truth is necessary because the structure of the story does the job. The theatrical grandiosity and irascibility Gavriel displayed on his visit to Buczacz in the first part of the story is undoubtedly taken as a symptom of his ongoing violation of the sanctity of the teivah by his antics. To be sure, he is chastened when he returns to Buczacz two years later, and after having been domesticated by the city's manners, he is allowed a period of five years to serve as hazzan. But because of the severity of his offense, payment must eventually be exacted.

The fate of this third Gavriel brings to a close the third panel of Agnon's cantorial triptych. The cantorate is presented in two aspects. It is an occupation, a salaried office, one of the *kelei qodesh*, the communal functionaries that include the shamash, the gabbai (unsalaried!), and, yes, the rabbi too. The relative wealth or poverty of a community often determines the quality and character of the hazzan it can secure. At the same time, the cantorate is a calling, a religious vocation in the classic sense, and this is the dimension that interests Agnon. The calling is founded on an endowment of spirituality and musical talent and creativity that is inborn and distributed unpredictably. An inordinately generous portion of this endowment descends upon the ill-fated Miriam Devorah, but because of the religious and social constraints of the world in which she lives, the gift becomes a curse. Not only is her life sacrificed but a hoary dynastic line of hazzanim is brought to an end. Being a hazzan turns out to be a calling that is both necessary and nearly impossible to fulfill. The space next to the teivah before which the

hazzan passes or into which he descends is a dangerous place for many reasons. The teivah does not suffer fools, and it demands exactitude, selflessness and fear of heaven. But its most acute danger issues from the desire to close the distance between the self and the teivah. Sincere intimacy with the teivah, as we saw in the case of the first two Gavriels, breeds a desire for even more intimacy and for an unmediated path of worship and service and engenders impatience with the gap that the Exile has imposed. For such a soul, purveying the estimable commodities of Sabbath pleasure and holiday joy to a thankful congregation will never be enough.

The chronicles of the hazzanim of Buczacz cannot be brought to closure without a connection being made to Agnon's own self-myth. During the second half of the nineteenth century Buczacz was fortunate to enjoy the services of a hazzan who came from Russia. He crossed the border to Galicia because he was in flight from the authorities having rescued two Jewish boys from the hands of Jewish kidnappers and prevented them from become "cantonists," conscripts into the Tsar's army. He was accepted as hazzan in Buczacz because of his solid skills and good character and despite his unfamiliar origins and despite the fact that his primary recommendation came from a Hasidic rebbe. Narrator and implied author merge as Agnon explicitly explains that this is the hazzan who played an important role in the autobiographical story "Hasiman" [The Sign], which Emunah Yaron placed at the end of *Ir umelo'ah* and which I placed at the beginning of this study. Like the earliest hazzanim of Buzcacz, the narrator points out, the Russian hazzan served for many decades, and this longevity enabled a short overlap between his old age and the narrator's boyhood. [27] It is from the "old hazzan," whose name is curiously never given in either story, that the narrator was first exposed to the pathos and power of Solomon Ibn Gabirol's piyyutim, and it is to this lofty tradition of sacred poetry that the narrator, despite his fallen métier of storytelling, later affiliates himself.

The last hazzan, also nameless, before the "First Destruction," Agnon's term for World War One, was a studious man who spent his days in the beit midrash when the narrator studied there as an adolescent. These were the years when the narrator first tried his hand at writing, and the first products of his pen were, of course, religious poems. Referring to the hazzan, the narrator tells us of this neighbor of his in the beit midrash, "I sometimes had the chance to speak with him and I even showed him some of my poems. Over the years he put them to music. Because I am not expert in music and play no instrument, they did not remain in my mouth and those poems and melodies were lost" (122). Thus the narrator brings his chronicle of

Commented [JS32]: I wonder if there's any overlap between this character and that of Reb Dovid in Oreach Nata LaLun around chapter 48.

Commented [JS33]: again, the Nobel Speech makes it more explicit: being a modern Hebrew author (story telling) in place of Holy singing.

the hazzanim of Buczacz to a final end, although we know, by virtue of the story we have read, that Buczacz would not remain forever without its sweet singer.

NOTE

[1] Hasiman

[2] On the subject generally, see the important early essay by Hillel Weiss, "Stories About Hazzanim by Agnon," *Maariv*, April 8, 1977, p. 39. <<I don't have this essay but I wonder if his piece in Amudim 1997 (I will send to you) is an expansion of the Maariv essay>>

[3] See the illuminated essay by Ze'ev Weiss, "When Did They Begin to Lower the Prayer Leader Before the Teivah?" [Hebrew] *Cathedra* 55 (1990), 8-21; also Raphael Loewe, "Ark, Archaism and Misappropriation" in *Biblical Hebrews, Biblical Texts: Essay in Memory of Michael P. Weitzman,* ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert and Gillian Greenberg (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

[4] Ezra Fleischer, *Shirat haqodesh bimei habeinayim* [Hebrew Liturgical Poetry in the Middle Ages] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975), 23-39.

[5] For an expansion of this idea, see Michal Arbell, "The Sad Hazzanit Miriam Devorah and Other Hazzanim in Agnon's Stories 'Hahazzanim' and 'Lefi hatsa'ar hasekhar'" [Hebrew], *'Ayin Gimel: Ketav eit lehequer yestirat Agnon*, no. 2, 2012, 108-130, accessed at http://www.biu.ac.il/js/li/aj/second_issue.html.

[6] *Ir umelo'ah*, p. 716; *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories by S. Y. Agnon*, p. 429 (translation by Arthur Green).

[7] On this story see Roman Kazman, "The Unrealized 'Hahazzanim': The Communal Rhetoric of S. Y. Agnon" [Hebrew], *'Ayin Gimel: Ketav eit lehequer yestirat Agnon*, no. 2, 2012, 131-37, and in the same issue by "Reading 'Hahazzamin,' 93-107. The article by Michal Arbell in n. 5 is part of a symposium on the story. Accessed at http://www.biu.ac.il/js/li/aj/second_issue.html.

[8] The chronology here seems fanciful. If the figure of the narrator correlates with Agnon, who was a boy in the beit midrash of Buczacz at the end of the nineteenth century, there are a number of generations to be accounted for between him and Miriam Devorah at the end of the seventeenth.

[9] For a good overview see the Hebrew Wikipedia site under "qol ishah 'ervah."

[10] The term for melancholy in the story is *marah shehorah*. On the history of melancholy as a diagnostic term, seeXX and its discussion by Sherwin Nuland in TNR. The description of the progress of the symptoms toward death given on p. 76 of the story coincides remarkably with clinical accounts.

[11] A significant digression within R. Mikhl's story concerns his second wife Mindl. A famous song about Count Potocki terrorizing a poor Jew on his way to synagogue Friday evening is supposedly based on incidents that occurred to her father, and the narrator goes so far as translate a stanza of the song from Polish. This is yet another instance of poetry and songs being based upon persecution. Mindl herself is another example of a good woman dependent upon an unreliable man. The infestation of bed bugs, which torment the new bride, took root in the two months of household neglect between the death of his wife and his remarriage.

[12] It's worth noting that the biblical prototype for the name Miriam was both a prophetess and singer of songs. The biblical Devorah, in addition to being a warrior leader, was the author of a great song. << I think I may have mentioned this PURE SPECULATION before: I assume the name Miriam Devora was chosen by Agnon because those were 2 (Biblical) women who filled leadership roles usually held by men (navi and shofet), and each also sang at some point. It occurred to me that Agnon's eldest sister with whom he was reportedly close was named Devora (Dora Wiener). She was his first audience for stories he wrote as a lad, and apparently had some writerly talent herself, but presumably this was not encouraged in girls. There's a rumor put forth by their younger sister Rosa that one of Agnon's early Yiddish publications was actually written by Devora - in all cases is was published with the penname Devora Czaczkes. See Band pp. 7, 11, and esp 33 n13.>>

[13] This was a work that was thought to have been written under Sabbatean influence. On this matter, see Tzahi Weiss, "'Things That Are Better Concealed Than Revealed': An Historical-Biographical Study of S. Y. Agnon's Attitude Toward the Sabbatean Movement and the Traditional Jewish World," in *AJS Review* 36:1 (April 2012), 104, n. 4. Agnon's attitude toward the book seems to have shifted from early enthusiasm to later ambivalence. <<I think there's material on this in Elchanan Shilo's book on Agnon and kabbala, let me know if you want me to

check. See also Chaim Stern's essay on Agnon's use of Hemdat Yamim in Yamim Noraim in *Bikoret uFarshanut* 35-36 (2002) journal from BIU.>>

[14] The story's final paragraph coyly hints at a channel of lineal influence that cannot be stopped up. Miriam Devorah's youngest son Elchanan, although married into a shop-keeping life, is a dreamy poet whose mind cannot cease composing Hebrew verse.

[15] September 26 and 29 and October 10.

[16] Ezekiel 9:4, 6 and Daniel 8:16 and 9:21. For a survey of these sources, see Malkah Poni, "'The Man Clad in Linen': Tradition and Innovation in the Development of a Literary Theme" [Hebrew], *Meḥqerei Giv'ah* (תשסח-ט), 47-99.

[17] It is worth pointing out that the coins are taken out of a strongbox called *teivat hashulḥan*, and teivah is also the word used later in the story when Gavriel's wife produces coins from a container. The term teivah in the sacramental sense we have been using it derives, of course, from the fact that it was a box that contained the fragments of the Tablets of the Law and then the Torah scrolls. Yet the contrast between these two uses of the term remains intriguing.

[18] On the tragic dimension in Agnon, see Ariel Hirschfeld, *Liqro et Agnon* [Reading Agnon] (?: Ahuzat Bayit, 2011) ??.

[19] In the Apocrypha, Sirach 3:21.

[20] On the image of R. Amnon, see the important article by Michal Arbell, "R. Amnon of Mainz as Paragon: The Development of a Cultural Icon in the Works of Agnon" [Hebrew] in Avidov Lipsker and Rella Kushelevsky, *Studies in Jewish Narrative*, Vol. II (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2009), 325-59.

[21] Isserles's fame was based in part on his interpolations in Joseph Karo's *Shulḥan 'arukh* that reconcile that law code with practice in European communities.

[22] On the role of Satan, see Aryeh Weinman, "Agnon's 'Linen Man': Abraham and Satan in the Land of Ambiguity" in *Prooftexts* Vol. 7 (1987), 65-71.

[23] For an elaboration of this idea, see my *Ḥurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* ( ), ch. .

[24] Arbell

[25] R. Amnon is the great figure of legend and the composer of one of the most famous prayers in the liturgy. But when compared with Gavriel, it is the latter who never waivered in his faith and who endured sufferings that last two and half years rather than a few days.

[26] http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Kamianets-Podilskyi , by Benyamin Luken. Pol., Kamieniec Podolski; Rus., Kamenets Podol'skii. Despite the later size and fame of this fortress city, in the first half of the eighteenth century, when this story takes place, the city had a small Jewish population, having undergone Turkish conquest, an expulsion, and coerced theological disputations. It is no wonder then that Gavriel would be interested in relocating in Buczacz. How the small Jewish population could have sustained a choir in addition to a hazzan is less clear.

[27] The nameless Russian hazzan, a man of estimable qualities, would seem to present a refutation to the argument that it is impossible to overcome the dangers of standing before the teivah. The explanation, I would offer, is lodged in the question of period. The term of his service lies beyond the vague cut-off after which Agnon declines to follow the fortunes of worship and study in Buczacz precisely because those institutions have lost their numinous power. Therefore the space before the teivah is not charged with dangerous uncertainty.