

AMOS OZ

The Silence of Heaven

AGNON'S FEAR OF GOD



THE SILENCE OF HEAVEN

A M O S O Z

*Translated from
the Hebrew by
Barbara Harshav*

The Silence of Heaven

A G N O N ' S F E A R O F G O D

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In quoting from literary works, I have referred whenever possible to published English translations and have cited corresponding page numbers. Occasionally, however, the published translation did not fit the point of Amos Oz's analysis and I had to provide my own translations.

Barbara Harshav

Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the dean of modern Hebrew prose and a recipient of the 1966 Nobel Prize for literature, is not well known in the English-speaking world. *Only Yesterday*, Agnon's greatest novel, is now being published for the first time, by Princeton University Press, in Barbara Harshav's translation. It is a special thrill for me to have my book on Agnon published in English at about the same time. I regard Agnon as one of my literary mentors; his sage, subtle, ironic voice helped me, back in my formative years, find my own voice—partly by struggling to free myself from Agnon's linguistic spell.

The Silence of Heaven focuses on Agnon's theological soul searching. Judging by his novels and stories, Agnon believed in God, yet felt that God was no one's friend. Agnon was an observant Jew—a synagogue-goer—but his heart was tormented by theological doubts. He often wrote about an omnipotent yet merciless God. This theme is never stated directly by the narrator in Agnon's stories and novels; rather, it is expressed by minor, esoteric, eccentric, unreliable characters. Yet the tragedy of Isaac Kumer in *Only Yesterday* and the misery of many other "believers" in Agnon's novels convey the subtle subversion of Agnon himself, a man who must have felt that the silence of Heaven is loaded with horrors.

Amos Oz

ARAD, ISRAEL, AUGUST 1, 1999

This book comprises three readings of three works by S. Y. Agnon, written not by a scholar, but by a reader of Agnon who loves what he has read.

Agnon's heroes and their creator usually treat questions of reward and punishment, the ways of the world, and the reasons for actions as religious issues—providing that the term “religious” is broad enough to encompass doubt, heresy, and bitter irony about Heaven. The Hebrew critic Shlomo Tsemakh has stated, “A person doesn't curse God if God is not in his heart.” Agnon's heroes and the narrator who accompanies them sometimes approximate that religious position.

Nevertheless, in Agnon it is not always “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (Eccles. 1:2), nor is the end necessarily “everything is heard, revere the Lord.” A broad spectrum of theological, metaphysical, and ethical possibilities is laid out in Agnon's stories. Whenever I reread them, I see how close Agnon's positions toward Heaven, Eros, Judaism and Zionism, clamorous rhetoric, or humility and silence are to the positions of several other great writers of the new Hebrew literature, especially Haim Nachman Bialik and Yosef-Hayyim Brenner, and at times also to those of Uri Tsvi Greenberg: between faith and the shock of doubt, between yearning and revulsion, between love and hate, and between intimacy and disgust. But the blazing rage in Bialik, Brenner, and Greenberg is not in Agnon—instead there is a mockery bitter as scorpions. Yet with all his mockery, Agnon is sometimes full of compassion for man and his situation within “the work that is wrought under the sun” (Eccles. 2:17).

The book begins with “The Heart, the Dead Space, and the Way Back”—my talk at an Agnon commemoration at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1975, previously published in my book *Under This Blazing Light* (1978). “The Mockery of Fate and the Madness of

the Righteous Woman” was published in the Rosh Hashanah edition of *Ha-Arets*, September 22, 1991. “Stolen Waters and Bread Eaten in Secret” was published in a different version in *Ha-Arets*, April 19, 1989. The fourth and by far the largest part of the book, “Guilt and Orphanhood and Fate: A Reading of *Only Yesterday*,” is published here for the first time.

Each chapter should be read along with the story it discusses.

Many years of reading Agnon with high school students at Kibbutz Hulda and Givat Brenner, at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and in several institutions abroad, as well as with many literary evening circles, have contributed to this book. If a whiff of an oral presentation lingers in it, I won’t be sorry. I learned a great deal of this material from my students, and if I thanked every one of them by name, I could fill a book. Thanks to them and to my first teachers, Aharon Apelfeld, Dov Sadan, Shimon Halkin, and Gershon Shaked, who taught me how to approach Agnon’s stories. Special thanks to my friends Haim Be’er and Rafael Weizer, who opened my eyes to large and small things, showed me what I didn’t see, and saved me from many bad mistakes. Thanks also to Tirza Vardi of the Department of Hebrew Language and Literature at Ben-Gurion University for checking and correcting the citations and references and providing good footnotes, and to Tsruya Shalev and Orna Levi, who brought this book closer to my vision of it.

Amos Oz

CHAPTER 1

The Heart, the Dead Space, and the Way Back

*Because of that historical catastrophe when
Titus the Roman Emperor destroyed Jerusalem
and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born
in one of the cities of Exile. But all the time I
imagined myself as having been born in
Jerusalem.*

S. Y. Agnon

Those words, as all readers of Agnon know, are true. But, strangely enough, their opposite is also true. Had Agnon chosen to say “Because of that historical catastrophe when East European Jewry fell apart, I became a Hebrew writer in Jerusalem. But I always saw myself as one who was born in one of the cities of Galicia and destined to be a rabbi there”—those words would also be true and right on target.

Perhaps it is in this paradox, the tormented tension between one tenet and its opposite, that we must recognize the trauma that made Agnon what he is. For every true writer becomes a writer because of a profound trauma experienced in youth or childhood. And if we hedge our statement with a myriad of reservations, with all kinds of “although” and “nevertheless,” perhaps we might venture to say that the flight of the narrator’s imagination is as high as the depth of his wound, or, in other words, the force of his scream is as intense as his pain. Indeed, the title of one of Agnon’s short stories is “The Reward Matches the Pain.” (Yes, I hear you, there are people who suffer a trauma and don’t become writers, but rather saints or murderers or whatever, but I did say “with a myriad of reservations.”) If, for instance, we take a Hebrew writer today, we shall find that he is tormented with the question of whether it is good or bad to expel the population of an Arab village, and his hero suffers emotional distress because it is good according to one system of values and bad according to another, and he accepts both systems and both have shaped his beliefs. Or another writer is torn between admiration for brute force, on the one hand, and respect for the spirit in general and the ethical spirit in particular, on the other. Yet, beyond all differences in talent, perhaps we may say that the trauma, the rift, in Agnon’s soul was deeper and more painful than those; hence the creative tension, the vigor of the sources of energy, the depth of the torments are of a different order altogether. For Agnon’s pain and the distress of his generation were malignant: incurable, insoluble, inextricable. There is One Who hears our prayer or there is not. There is Justice and there is a Judge or there is not. All the acts of our forefathers are meaningful or they are not. And while we’re at it—is there meaning to our own acts or isn’t there? And is there any meaning in any act at all? What is sin and what is guilt and what is righteousness? In all these, Agnon is neither guide nor model, but he and his heroes run around from one extreme to another in dread and despair. Such dread and such despair are the source of great works of literature in other nations as well, in other lan-

guages and in other times. And with all the restraint that imbues Agnon's writing, writing that comes "after the writer has immersed himself in ice water" ("The Tale of the Scribe"), with all the moderation and dissimulation and muting and circumlocution and irony and sometimes even sophistry—with all that, the sensitive reader will hear a muffled scream . . . an open wound. For there is a genuine creator here.

Agnon's fictional world is made of sin and punishment, temptation and responsibility, the normal and the abnormal, the system and outside the system, guilt and judgment.

Man is a guilty creature. All the characters in Agnon's fiction are guilty souls. But Agnon is neither preacher nor theologian—he is not Rabbi Grunam May-Salvation-Arise of *Only Yesterday*: There is guilt, but we cannot know where the accusing finger arises, who is the judge, and who administers the punishment. And perhaps, most horrible of all—the ultimate dread oozes from between Agnon's lines—perhaps there is no Emperor in the city and there is nothing, for in that case all existence is an ugly joke and a senseless abomination.

Everyone is guilty in Agnon's fiction: Isaac Kumer in *Only Yesterday*, who deserted his hometown and abandoned his father and brothers and sisters and violated "Thou shalt not covet" and other prohibitions; and the guest in *A Guest for the Night*, who stayed the night and desired greatness—to be nothing less than a miracle-working saint who can restore his hometown from its destruction. Menashe-Haim in "The Crooked Shall Be Made Straight," and Manfred Herbst in *Shira*, and Hirshl Hurvitz in *A Simple Story*, and even the wretched Farenheim in "Farenheim," who "embezzled from the firm"—they're all guilty.

Indeed, a reader of Agnon's *The Bridal Canopy* might think there is refuge from sin and guilt under the wings of faith, or, as Agnon says, "within the system." But Agnon himself, jester and tormented man that he was, wrote *The Bridal Canopy* so that we readers will never know if Reb Yudel and his miraculous adventures really did exist or were only a parable; and if they were a parable, was its point aimed at the system and its crooked ways or against us and such "light human beings" as we are? My teacher, Dov Sadan, caught this double meaning long ago.

Moreover, within the system we can expect to find not only peace of mind and proper order, reward and punishment, integrity,

Torah and its rewards; within the system—according to Agnon’s fiction—also lurk the internal contradiction, the absurd, the iniquity the mind can’t bear, the repression of desire, the repression of emotion, the disgustingly smug petit bourgeois obesity, and the sacrifice of Eros, that life force, as a victim on the altar of harsh religious principles and laws. Ask the righteous woman Tehilah, who suddenly became a desperate chatterbox at the end of her days and even “raised herself in a kind of dance,” and she will tell you what’s going on “inside the system.” Ask the “Exiled One,” ask Menashe-Haim, ask the guest who came for a night and wanted to restore the system to its former glory. I am indicating all these possibilities and people here to refute those who want to find in Agnon’s works a mine of simplistic “Jewish consciousness.”

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In the depths of his fiction, did Agnon hope “to restore the old system” after his heroes discovered that, outside the system, what lies in store for them are evil lust, lies, hollow phraseology, and, above all—madness and death? An innocent reader may be misled into thinking that Agnon is seeking a way back. Another innocent reader may mistakenly think that Agnon is not seeking a way back. It is the ancient dilemma: “From You to You I shall flee.” Does not Arzef, the taxidermist in *Only Yesterday*, kill animals, take away their souls, and grant them a kind of eternity in exchange? And the animals, the story relates, love Arzef and come and plead with him to kill them so they will live in another dimension.

And one reader, a character in *Shira*, says to the writer Hemdat, who appears in *Shira* and other stories: “Our contemporaries expect to find new tidings in creative works.” As for Hemdat, he replies, as is his wont, with a blend of innocence and cunning: “I didn’t come to give an answer to the question ‘Where are you going?’ but sometimes I do respond to the question ‘Where did you come from?’”

Thus a great Hebrew writer apparently told us where we came from. But is that what he really told us? Daniel Bach in *A Guest for the Night* says: “I’m a light human being, and I don’t believe the Almighty wants the good for His creatures.” And if these horrible words aren’t enough, Daniel Bach adds: “I’m only a human being, flesh and blood, and when my flesh rots and my blood stinks, my lips cannot utter the praise of the Almighty.” Elimelech Kaiser in the same novel adds: “If you think the Supreme Being won’t accept our prayers like that, He’ll

ask Esau to pray to Him.”² This heresy sounds infinitely bolder and more bitter than the heresy of those who simply say that there is no God in Heaven and everything comes from primeval matter and ancient microscopic creatures.

Thus from Agnon’s stories of the past a repressed truth emerges: What was broken, was broken irremediably. The walls of religious law and tradition were broken neither by the perpetrators of pogroms nor wicked gentiles nor Hitler nor the assimilationists nor the men of the Enlightenment nor the Zionists; the Temple collapsed from within, under the burden of its own contradictions, under the weight of its laws and judgments and prohibitions. Even a simple gentile woman, Krulka, Mrs. Sommer’s cleaning woman in *A Guest for the Night*, is sorry for that guest, who stayed “far from his wife and children and [could] not distinguish between a thing that can be repaired and a thing beyond repair.”³

Therefore, there is no way back. Akavia Mazal may drool as nostalgically as he likes over the tombstones in the old graveyard. The gate is locked and the demons mock him. And, in quite a different case, Dr. Schimmelmänn in *Only Yesterday* may correct the Bible to his heart’s content according to modern taste, and with the foam of his words he may turn the Prophets into journalists—even so the demons mock him too, and Agnon mocks with them. There is no way back. Hence many slops of mockery are poured out in Agnon’s fiction onto all “who take refuge in the shadow of wisdom,” all who return to the ruins like archaeologists who collect shards (in the words of Haim Nachman Bialik’s poem “Facing the Bookcase”: “Mines in the graves of a nation and in the ruins of the spirit”). The archaeologist’s return to the ruins is not the return of a lost son to his father’s quarry. Woe to Weltfremd and to his erudition. And all of Manfred Herbst’s rummaging in the remnants of Byzantium that crumbled to dust makes no sense. Not to mention Gamzu in “Edo and Enam,” whose erudition cost him his life. If the way “back to Gumlidata” doesn’t lead to the madhouse, at best it leads to the leprosarium. And, as I said, the demons mock, and the innocent-cunning Hemdat often mocks with them.

Demons, I said. But I didn’t mean Baruch Kurzweil’s daemons—those belong to another song altogether.⁴ As for me, I find in Agnon’s fiction a wild and dark vein of pagan provocation. There is the hand of fate. There are bloodthirsty gods, forces of destiny, fatum. And there are all kinds of demons—as in Jaffa Belle of the Seas, described in

“A Vow of Faith,” and of course in “Edo and Enam” and in “Forever.” After Daniel Bach realized that the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He had removed His Shekhinah, in other tales other forces seemed to appear and fill the vacuum with some dark, idolatrous flapping of wings. Here are the demons who play with destinies, like the dog Balak with Isaac Kumer and the nurse Shira with Manfred Herbst—the finger of fate.

I am certainly not pigeonholing Agnon here into a faith or ideology or “worldview,” for he was far from all that. The Agnon who wrote in one place in *Shira*, “The gods who mock one another led Manfred,” is the same Agnon who wrote in the same novel, “A man and a woman . . . who were touched by the hand of God which the faithless call Destiny.” By simple analogy, you can stand at this point and proclaim that Agnon’s own words show that he is faithless. But Agnon defies simple analogies—except, perhaps, when he himself parts the curtain for a brief moment and peeps from behind the screen of intelligence and “wisdom” and says—in the story “Tehilah”—“I stood at times among the worshippers, at times among those who question.”⁵ There is no way back.

But what about the way forward? What does Agnon say about the return to Zion and about building the Land of Israel? In fact, he says the same thing Yosef-Hayyim Brenner says, though in a manner diametrically opposed: while Brenner smashes puffed-up falsehoods with hammer blows, Agnon appears holding a sharp pin.

In Agnon’s fiction, as in Brenner’s, the new society in the Land of Israel has a few Pioneers endowed with the modesty of hidden saints, the enthusiasm of Hasids, and the dedication of “devoted scholars.” Yet there are also others, who made their way to the Land of Israel afflicted with the diseases of Exile we know from Agnon’s “With Our Young and Our Old” or from Brenner’s “Around the Points,” those who spout hollow rhetoric, who are devoured by doubts and torments, who pursue small positions of power and honor in a nutshell, pursued themselves by hysterical frenzy—the frantic con artists and the eccentrics seeking Repair. And on the other hand again, in Agnon’s tales of Jaffa and the settlements, as in Brenner’s, the Old Yishuv appears as a ritual bath of stagnant water. And like Brenner’s and Bialik’s, Agnon’s heart went out to “the eternally modest people who keep silent.” As for the others, Brenner assaults them furiously in his fiction with Dostoevskian fists, while Agnon slices them with a Thomas Mann-like razor of irony. In the Petah Tikvah of *Only Yesterday*, Rabbi Menahem,

the “Standing Menahemke,” lives quietly, unlike frantic pushers like Grisha and Gorishkin. In *Only Yesterday*, in the Old Yishuv in Meah Shearim, Reb Grunam the mad preacher runs rampant, unlike the blind seer Reb Haim-Rafael, who is humbler than grass. Brenner himself appears in *Only Yesterday* when a lie is smashed to smithereens—an incident that may indeed have taken place at the Bezalel Art School during the time of its founder Boris Schatz. A Hanukah party was held “with licentiousness and gluttony”; a statue of Matityahu the Hasmon-ean holding a sword was put up, and the guests danced around it as on Christmas night. Agnon writes that if the spirit of life had been breathed into the statue, it would have come down off its pedestal and stabbed them all with the sword in its hand. For Matityahu the Hasmonean was an iconoclast and a zealot for his religion. Indeed, all the time the Greeks enslaved his nation, he didn’t budge; only when they moved to forbid the practice of religious commandments did he rebel against them. (And with that, some comfortable Zionist stereotypes cracked: the Hasmoneans as the “Shomer” of ancient times, and Matityahu’s revolt as a “national liberation movement.”) When the Brenner of Agnon’s tale hears this, he bursts out laughing with “a vulgar laughter,” and Hemdat also smiles thinly.

Let us digress briefly from the discussion of Agnon’s work for a personal story. In 1961, a young student assigned a paper on the Eretz Israel fiction of Brenner and Agnon learned of the paternal affection that Brenner—a respected and admired writer—showed for Agnon, a young beginner. That friendship, which originated in Jaffa during the Second Aliya, amazed the student, who found it hard to understand why on earth a bitter, sensitive, slovenly, and quarrelsome man like Brenner, a Russian and perhaps a bit Dostoyevskian, had become fond of the young Agnon-Hemdat, a delicate, shy young fellow, a poetic dandy, a kind of fragrant citron indulging himself in his wrapping. So that student, in his youthful naïveté, went to see Agnon and asked him: Venerable Mr. Agnon, what bound you and Brenner together in Jaffa? Weren’t the two of you different souls? Agnon looked obliquely at the questioner, smiled at the young fellow, smiled again to himself, and then said: “Between me and Yosef-Hayyim, there was a closeness rooted in a mutual love.” The student was excited. He thought he had stumbled onto the trail of some piquant love affair, and if he would just

go on pulling at Agnon's sleeve, the writer would tell him marvels to make his head spin. And so, in his youth, the lad pleaded with Agnon to reveal to him what that mutual love had been. Once again Agnon smiled (the smile, as the lad later learned, of a butterfly hunter at the sight of a splendid specimen), almost winked, and said something like: "Well, I'll tell you a deep dark secret: In those days, when we lived in Jaffa, Yosef-Hayyim and I were both deeply in love with Shmuel Yosef Agnon."⁶

I will not analyze the irony in that little Agnon anecdote. But I will tell you that it was not mutual love but—first of all—reciprocal hatred that bound the two of them. And if what Agnon told that young student was cruel to Brenner as well as to himself, it was cruel in Agnon's particular way and by his particular system: subtle, sober, and slicing. Brenner, in his cruelty to himself and to others, was cruel tooth and nail. Both Brenner and Agnon pinned on the Zionist dream the ultimate hope, the hope after all hope is gone, but they weren't taken in by it, and they clearly discerned all those seeds of calamity that befell us from inside ourselves many years later. Agnon's fiction is filled with relativism and skepticism about politics and the "tools of the state" (the same tools that later excited the poet Natan Alterman and many other distinguished people). That skepticism is also evident in *The Book of the State* and in *Shira*—especially in some of the things Manfred Herbst tells his daughters.

Is there consolation, a way out, a path that may emerge from or be implied by Agnon's fiction? Sometimes you are tempted to generalize and say, "Blessed are the undefiled in the way" (Ps. 119:1). Yes and no. There is the extreme innocent, Reb Yudel Hasid, whose innocence perhaps stands him in good stead and perhaps doesn't, and he is liminally saved yet not saved at the end of *The Bridal Canopy*. Yet, on the other hand, there is an equally extreme innocent, the son of the son of the daughter of Reb Yudel's daughter, Isaac Kumer in *Only Yesterday*, who has no miracle and no trace of a miracle, and who succumbs to madness and death. There is an innocent named Taglicht, Light of Day, and there is a similar innocent named Gedalia Ziemlich, about whom *A Simple Story* relates that he "didn't despair [!] at calamity," that is, he expected it to come every day, and it certainly did come to him. There is Mr. Mintz, father of Tirza, on the one hand, and on the other hand there is the righteous woman Tehilah. These are the undefiled in the way. If any of them survives, it seems only by chance

or almost by a miracle. The others go to the leprosarium or to the mad-house or to the “House of the Living,” the graveyard.

And serenity? If there is serenity, it is granted in Agnon’s fiction only to a handful of exceptional individuals, savagely strong people who succeed in bursting out of the general cycle of temptation-sin-guilt-punishment that comes from within or descends as a disaster from without. In *Only Yesterday*, Yohanan Leichtfuss—Sweet Foot—for example, establishes his power over women and dogs by force and lives outside the circle. Samson Bloykof, the painter, exercises iron control over his sick body and rebukes his languishing lung for not being ashamed before his empty belly, and his empty belly for not being silent before his defective heart, and all three of them for raising their voices when he—Samson—even though he is sick and hungry, doesn’t say a single word. And above all, Arzef, who lives alone, “like the first Adam in the Garden of Eden,” in the desolation of Eyn Rogel, where he plays the lord of life and the lord of death. These individuals, because they are like animals or gods, have peace. But their peace entails shedding the image of man, which is an image of temptation-sin-guilt-torment-remorse.

There is, of course, yet another kind of peace of mind in Agnon’s fiction, as in Brenner’s. That is the peace of humility, in the sense of the tragic law Shakespeare expressed through Othello: “’Tis the plague of great ones; Prerogativ’d are they less than the base” (3.3.273). This is the bovine peace of Tsirl Hurvitz in *A Simple Story*, “who gave up everything for eating and drinking,” of Heinz Steiner, of some desiccated professors and smug social activists. But their serenity is bought at the cost of “giving up everything.” Giving up emotional life. Giving up the power to love. Castration of the soul. As Hirshl in *A Simple Story* says of his uncle who went mad: “His heart was a dead space inside him.”

It is a kind of choice, and ultimately it is forced on Hirshl himself (and, in another way, on Tirza Mazal née Mintz): to love, and “to pay for the conflagration with your fat and blood” (in Bialik’s words), with madness, torments, death—or not to love, and to purchase tranquility at the price of “a dead heart.” Hirshl may have found a crack to pass through between the horns of that dilemma, even though he also pays at first with torments and madness.

And now, a few sentences about Agnon’s narrative art. In Agnon, there is “the forest” and there is “the town.” The Agnon town has been thoroughly studied, perhaps even more than Adiel Amzeh