

Jewish Identity in Modern Hebrew Literature

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EVER SINCE THE JEW BEGAN TO UNDERGO THE process of emancipation, some two hundred years ago, the problem of his spiritual, cultural and intellectual identity has occupied his mind and, hence, his literature. Hebrew literature, which, until the end of the last century, was, to a large extent, a literature with a mission, reflected the desires and hopes of the Jewish people. It is for this reason that a study of the treatment of Jewish identity in modern Hebrew literature should give us further insight into the problem.

Three writers have been selected to represent three periods in modern Hebrew literature: a. Euchel: The Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) dating roughly from 1780 to 1880; b. Bialik: The national renaissance (*Hatehiyah*), from 1881 to 1914; c. Agnon: Contemporary Hebrew literature, in Europe, Palestine and Israel, from 1915 to the present time.

Although each is unique in his literary art and in his treatment of the subject, there is also in each the underlying assumption that, in a very special way, a sensitive, artistic writer must be attuned to his *Zeitgeist*. He does re-create it in his art if, indeed, he does not share in its very creation. In treating mainly one selection from his work, it is further assumed that the selection is representative both of the writer and of his time.

By Jewish identity I mean Jewish self-awareness and Jewish consciousness. That identity is manifested through the individual's attitude toward (a) the Jewish people (that is, the idea of Jewish peoplehood or nationhood), (b) his tradition, his heritage and his past, (with the emphasis mostly on religion, theology and philosophy), (c) his secular culture (with the emphasis on extra-religious aspects of life) and (d) his relations to the non-Jews. It is further manifested through such ideological and philosophical outlooks as particularism versus universalism, nationalism versus cosmopolitanism, and parochialism versus humanism in the interpretation of Judaism and its orientation to societies and cultures about it.

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The age of Hebrew Enlightenment was an age of change, the results of which may epitomize contemporary Judaism. It saw a change from a generally closed Jewish society to an open one. In Germany, the budding of that change was discerned toward the end of the eighteenth century; in

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Russia, however, the trend toward change became more noticeable only in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The goals of that change were the enlightenment of the Jews, the modernization of Judaism, and the revival of the Hebrew language and culture; all in all, the re-shaping and re-forming of Judaism and of Jews in accordance with the needs of the times and the ideals of European Enlightenment as understood by the *maskilim* (Hebrew "enlighteners").

The change itself was expressed in a substantial shift in values, in a search for new cultural and spiritual criteria. Concurrently, major attempts were made by the enlighteners to establish these criteria on the foundations of traditional Judaism. There was an upsurge of a new element of secularism, which replaced traditional religious truths with modern skepticism and doubt.

Indeed, there seems to have been a definite change in Jewish identity manifesting itself in Hebrew Literature.

EUCHEL: HAPPINESS WITHOUT THE COMMANDMENTS

One of the most representative writers of the early Hebrew Enlightenment literature is Issac Euchel (1756-1804), who was, in his diversified literary career, an editor of the first Hebrew periodical, *Hame'asef*, a biographer of Moses Mendelssohn and a playwright. In 1790, in *Hame'asef*¹, he published "The Letters of Meshulam ben Uriah Ha'eshtemo'i" which are the representative work discussed here. The "Letters" are an epistolary satire, somewhat similar to Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (Persian Letters) and to many other works of the epistolary genre which flourished in Europe in the eighteenth century.²

The story is simple, yet quite meaningful in our context. In 1769, an eighteen-year old youth, Meshulam, is sent by his father, Uriyah Ha'eshtemo'i, from Syria to Europe in order to learn "the customs of the people of these states and their disposition." Meshulam goes to Spain with a Marrano Jew, and there he becomes acquainted with the special and different way in which the Marranos observe Judaism in secrecy; he also gets to know the Christian way of worship, and he visits the Jewish community in Italy. Meanwhile, he receives two letters from home, one from his grandfather, and the other from his father. Each advises him as to the right way that he should choose for himself as a Jew. The grandfather, very strict in the observance of the commandments, uncompromising even with regard to minor customs, expresses the view of traditional Judaism. The father, on the other hand, is more modern in his

1. "Igrot Meshulam ben 'Uriyah Ha'eshtemo'i," *Hame'asef*, VI (1790): 38-50, 80-85, 171-176, 245-249.

2. For a more detailed discussion of Euchel and an analysis of his works see my study, "Isaac Euchel: Tradition and Change in the First Generation Haskalah Literature in Germany," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, XXVI (1-2, Spring-Autumn, 1975): 151-167; part two: XXVII (1, Spring, 1976): 54-70. A bibliography on Euchel appears in part one of that study, pp. 151-152.

approach, more lenient in religious observance, and generally more enlightened.

Meshulam represents the Jewish *maskil*—as a young, searching man. He searches for his own identity, and for his own spiritual, intellectual and religious image. The very search itself, the fact that the protagonist is looking for something outside of normative, traditional Judaism, and outside of Jewish civilization, is, indeed, indicative of a discontent that was taking place in the Hebrew circles of the enlighteners. The beginning of the search is the beginning of change, for it represents the conviction—typical to secular Judaism in the last two hundred years—that Jewish civilization, as it had been known throughout the ages, was no longer sufficient. Meshulam is also the embodiment of the noble savage. However, unlike the noble savage of European literature who reveals the corruption of European society, its institutions and its religion, Meshulam exposes the alleged inferiority of traditional Judaism in comparison to the supposedly superior European culture. This notion, which gained ground during the period of Hebrew Enlightenment, has undergone drastic changes in the course of the eventful history of our century, as manifested in the writings of the two other Hebrew authors.

Euchel employs a symbolic act which Meshulam performs in order to signify his point. Immediately at the beginning of his tour, Meshulam changes his clothes; he takes off his oriental garments, replacing them with western ones. This act should not be under-estimated. Its broad symbolic and cultural implication can be better understood when we examine it against the classical Jewish sources. A Midrash about the exodus from Egypt states that the Israelites deserved to be saved because they had not relinquished three fundamental aspects of their identity: their names, their clothes and their language. The Midrash emphasizes the importance of these external signs of identity, and one's need for a culture in order to achieve social, spiritual and religious independence. Significantly, contemporary Hebrew literature is still engaged in the same themes.³

Euchel, it should be emphatically stressed, is far from preaching assimilation.⁴ To be sure, he does not preach Jewish isolationism either. Being a rationalist, he examines the heritage of the past and determines for himself what suits his time and place. Being an enlightener, he would like to expose himself and his people to European culture and learning, as he himself endeavored to do when he studied under the German philosopher, Kant. He no longer considers the Jewish milieu as self-

3. See, for example, Agnon's "The Lady and the Peddler" (clothes as symbols occur in many of his stories) and Aharon Megged's "Yad Vashem" (The Name).

4. Avraham Sha'anani is of the opinion that Euchel was an assimilationist. See his recent article in *Baruch Kurzweil Memorial Volume* (Tel Aviv & Ramat Gan, 1975), pp. 354-374. In his other works Sha'anani considered Euchel as less extreme; see "Iyunim Besifrut Hahashalah (Merhavayah, 1952), pp. 75-80; *Hasifrut Ha'ivrit Lizramehah*, I (Tel Aviv, 1962), pp. 75-77 (Hebrew).

contained and self-sufficient, and it is his firm conviction that both Judaism and the Jews must conform to the standards of European society if they wish to become full-fledged equal citizens. This rationale of Enlightenment did change when the focus of Judaism changed toward Jewish nationalism.

Meshulam, therefore, represents the search of Haskalah for the golden mean between Judaism and European culture. Traditional Judaism of the past, represented by Meshulam's grandfather, is utterly rejected, although Meshulam does show respect for it. Moderation in Judaism, openness and tolerance are manifested in the figure of Meshulam's father. Meshulam ostensibly adopts his view of Judaism externally and temporarily, though he is full of skepticism and doubt. He raises tantalizing questions, one of which, I believe, has been echoed in the Jewish writings of the Enlightenment for many years, and, perhaps, epitomizes the most crucial problem of Jewish identity in the last two centuries. Is it possible—he asks—for a Jew to be happy and maintain his integrity without the observance of the religious commandments? The problem, according to Euchel, is: how would a Jew retain his identity as a Jew while attempting to adopt the non-Jewish aspects of European culture? The question indicates that although Meshulam agrees, at least for the time being, with his father's interpretation of Judaism, he can no longer accept ready-made answers about his own identity. Empirically oriented, he must experiment for himself; he must also experience as an individual Jew what it means to be outside the spheres of normative, traditional Judaism.

Meshulam's attitude toward the Judaism of the Marranos signifies, perhaps, Euchel's literary way of telling us how he sees his religion and his culture in the age of Enlightenment. Significantly, Meshulam rejects his grandfather's Judaism in favor of the Marranos' more purified, refined, and original version. They observe some of the important holidays, but most of them do not observe the commandments at all. They believe that "worship in the heart" (*Avodah shebalev*) is the basic tenet of Judaism. Although Euchel does not elaborate on the Marrano theology, he presents it as a form of deistic, rationalistic Judaism.

The new kind of Jew, the ideal Jew of the Enlightenment, living in ideal Jewish circumstances, is envisioned by Euchel in his portrayal of the Italian Jews who live in peace among their neighbors and are respected by them. Their physical appearance is important. They are clean shaven, they grow their curly hair, as was the custom, and they do not differ in their clothes from the non-Jews. They speak Italian fluently and clearly like any of the Italian poets. They are also erudite in other fields and they are well-bred.

It is in this context that Euchel utilizes a slogan of European Enlightenment, "The foundation of the probe of man is man." Unmistakably, it is a paraphrase, in Hebrew translation, of Alexander Pope's adage,

“The proper study of mankind is man.” It is no accident that Euchel lays so much emphasis on man. In his ideal portrayal of the Italian Jews there is hardly a reference to their Jewishness.

One suspects that Euchel adopted the ideology of another important writer of the Haskalah in Germany, Naphtali Herz Wessely, who discussed the relations between Judaism and secular knowledge, between the Jew as a Jew and the Jew as a human being.⁵ Wessely stresses secular knowledge over traditional Judaism, and highlights the Jew primarily as a human being. As a matter of fact, he cites secular knowledge and humanism as being prerequisites for Judaism and for being a Jew. Thus, Judaism in modern times becomes subservient to western civilization, so that it can no longer exist as an entity by itself. In the same vein, a Jew can be part of humanity if he lacks Judaism yet adheres to western culture; however, a Jew cannot be regarded as a Jew if he does not have secular knowledge even though he fully adheres to Judaism. It should be noted that Wessely retracted some of his views, insisted that he was misinterpreted, and possibly was unaware of the implication of some of his utterances which were cited above. Yet his views can best represent Euchel’s stand as well as the viewpoint of the Hebrew enlighteners in general.

Euchel’s Judaism is exemplified by an increase of secularism, an attachment to the values of European culture, and by some break with the traditional continuity of historical Judaism. Euchel and the other Hebrew enlighteners attempted to re-discover in Judaism what they had found best in European culture. A re-interpretation and a re-definition of Judaism is the crux of their work.

They wished to create a new image of the Jew—in a way, a new Jewish identity—as opposed to the image of the Jew as seen in European literature for generations of anti-Jewish tendencies. Since *Galut*—the state of exile—is offered as the cause for the Jewish predicament, the antithesis of *Galut*, messianic redemption, is modified into a civil and a social solution of the Jewish problem. A this-worldly approach in defining Judaism and Jewish goals and aspiration is adopted by these enlighteners. It is supplemented with a modern concept of the uniqueness of Judaism and of the Jews as holders of the eternal truth of monotheism for the benefit of humanity.

To Euchel, Jewish identity bears not the tone of the affirmative, but, rather, of the question mark. It means a continuous search, an everlasting probe into one’s entity, which is in a constant state of flux. The answer which one may arrive at is only temporary as it becomes the basis for still further probing into one’s spiritual, religious and cultural identity.

Even a cursory attempt of evaluation cannot ignore the inadequacies

5. In his *Divrei Shalom Ve’emet* (Berlin, 1782-5).

and the lack of a systematic view in Euchel's presentation of Judaism. But these are the result of his literary medium. It is not always what he says that counts, but, rather, how he says it. The tone of skepticism weighs heavily in his work, signifying the trends of the time. Historically speaking, this sensitive writer foresaw, some 185 years ago, the direction of modern Judaism and the modern Jew.

BIALIK: REBIRTH OF THE SPIRIT

A much later stage of the development of the concept of Jewish identity is portrayed by Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873-1934) who is considered the national poet (*Hameshorer Hale'umi*), and one of the greatest artists that the Jewish people has produced in modern times. Poet, prose-writer, essayist, translator, and editor, Bialik represents the modern renaissance in Hebrew literature (*Tehiyah*). He is a product of the post-Haskalah generation who witnessed the results of the over one hundred years of aspirations of the enlighteners. He saw the growing anti-Semitism of Europe, culminating in what was then called "The blizzards in the south" (*Hasufot banegev*), the 1881 pogroms in Russia, which shattered whatever hope was still left among the enlighteners for a European orientation of the Jews civically, socially and culturally. The *maskilim* then increased their efforts to find a solution to the Jewish problem outside of Europe. The idea of Jewish nationalism began to gain grounds and a new Jewish self-awareness arose.

Euchel was a first-generation rebel, and we noted his complete rejection of traditional Judaism. Bialik was a product of another generation, which had acquired a historical perspective. Thus, his rebellion against the old order is of a different nature, and that is why he is able to appreciate traditional Judaism for what it is and for what it was. He expresses this appreciation especially in his poetry and it is epitomized, in his writings, in Bet Hamidrash, the house of worship, which was also the house of study. He sees it as the fountainhead of Judaism and of Jewish existence, of Jewish peoplehood. "The treasure of our soul," the essence of Judaism, is to be found in this house of study. Bialik is convinced that historical Judaism drew its strength and fortitude from Bet Hamidrash.⁶

Bialik was a modern man. Like many of the Jews of his time, he had spent his youth in Bet Hamidrash, yet he left it for the attractions of the outside world. Only later did he come back, defeated and despairing, after the disappointments on the outside. Upon his return to Bet Hamidrash, he realized that the demolished sanctuary is a reflection of his own state, and he then resolved on an identical personal and national goal: to fortify himself and Judaism as well, in the fortress of the spirit.⁷ Under the influence of Aḥad Ha'am's writings on spiritual Zionism, Bialik envisions

6. "If Thou Wouldst Know," *Complete Poetic Works of H.N. Bialik*, ed. Israel Efros (New York, 1948) 1, pp. 76-78.

7. "On the Threshold of the House of Prayer," *Ibid.*, pp. 29-33.

the rebuilding of God's demolished temple, as he phrases it, which to him symbolizes the re-instituting of the house of Israel. Metaphorically, he writes about past destructions of the temple and its subsequent rebuilding. Thus, he ends his poem on a note of hope. Judaism of the past, he says, has always been able to emerge out of its ruins as a new, viable entity, based on the foundations of its antecedents. Through this unique historical continuity, contemporary Judaism will reincarnate itself in a new form and shape. The poet uses the metaphor of light in describing the new Judaism, "The light will rout its darkened shades again."⁸ Light stands for Enlightenment, just as it does in the early writings of the Haskalah. But Bialik's Enlightenment is quite different. While Euchel was attempting to change Judaism in accordance with demands from outside of its spheres, and to make it palatable to European Enlightenment, Bialik is not interested in dictates from without. He listens only to his own spiritual needs as mandated by the modern age. The need for a re-definition of Judaism does not come to Bialik—as it did with Euchel—as a prerequisite for changing the individual Jew. To Bialik, a re-definition of Judaism is a necessity because the individual Jew has, indeed, changed. "In our days"—he writes in one of his articles—"the needs have changed and so have the hearts."⁹

In his desire to re-define Judaism, Bialik conducts a voyage of search into himself, into his personal life, and into his lost childhood. It is quite different from Euchel's search which probes into the future. It is of the utmost importance to note that, in Bialik's writings, the problems of the individual are interwoven with the problems of Jewish society. The tragedy of Judaism in the modern age is the personal tragedy of Bialik, the individual. Thus, vital insight into Bialik's view of Jewish identity may be gained through an analysis of his autobiographical writings.

This search voyage is the subject of one of Bialik's most stimulating stories, entitled "Aftergrowth," (*Safi'ah*) a poetic autobiography of one of the children of the aftergrowth in Israel, as he puts it. "Aftergrowth" is the epitome of a whole generation of Hebrew writers looking for their lost childhood—that crucial age for the formation of character and cultural orientation, the age in which an individual's identity is shaped and molded. Suffice it to mention the names of authors like Lilienblum and Feierberg who, in their writings, bemoaned their lost childhood.

In the story, Bialik describes the childhood of the protagonist who is deprived of his direct contact with nature and his personal relationship with his God when his family moves to the city. Lonely and forlorn even before the move, the protagonist is depicted as chosen personally by God, who is his guardian and protector in a physical sense, as well as being the source of his poetic art. The notion of *Atah Behartanu* is poetically illustrated here. The child later yearns for this unique, solitary and indi-

8. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

9. *Hasefer Ha'ivri*.

vidualistic world and for the sights which formed it, but he can never regain them. Only on special occasions does he remember them, or see himself in his dreams as part of that lost world. The child, as depicted by *Bialik*, is completely detached from the outside world. There is an ever-increasing gap between him and society; there is a wide gulf separating his most subjective entity from the objective world that surrounds him; there is no smaller a division between him and the Jewish world of which he is supposedly a part.

The protagonist has lost his paradise, for which there is no apparent replacement. He is as far from reality as his lost world is from him. To state it more meaningfully, he is further removed from his Jewish reality. The sum total of it is that the process of transmitting the Jewish heritage through the regular educational channels of the *Heder* (the religious elementary school) are completely broken and the child becomes alienated from both Jewish society and from the nation's past. He is removed from intimate, personal contact with the God of his childhood as he is thrown into the reality of a crude, cruel world. The protagonist is incapable of receiving the transmission because he was torn away from his unique natural environment; he is unable to relate to the Jews around him because he is not tuned to them as a result of his artistic disposition.

In one of the most devastating descriptions of so-called Jewish "togetherness," the first-person narrator of "Aftergrowth" relates a dream that he had:

In my dream a long, sandy track stretches ahead of me, crowded with long files of persons returning from a fair. I am among them. How I come to be among them I do not know, but I am in the midst of a noisy company and go their way almost without noticing it. There is a confused hubbub and yelling all around. Carts, wagons, empty or laden with wares or with passengers, drivers, horse-leaders and grooms, horsemen and men afoot, man and beast in a confused multitude, weary and heavy, drag themselves through clouds of dust and rising sand. Walking is as hard as splitting the sea. Legs and wheels sink halfway in the slipping sand.¹⁰

This is the Jewish reality of which he is a part, this is the Jewish people of which he is a member. The narrator concludes:

They are indeed no more than a herd, a driven flock; and I also belong to this herd, this flock. I straggle along amid them, without any idea what I am doing there. I am weary. Oh, my head, my head! if this goes on I shall faint; all the same I keep on going forward. I keep on walking in spite of myself, as though I have no idea what I am doing.¹¹

The sensitive individual sees around him an embodiment of ugliness, in people as well as in nature. It is a far cry from the pure world of his early

10. Hayyim Nahman Bialik, *Aftergrowth and Other Stories* (Philadelphia, 1939), p. 51.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

childhood, which he is still yearning for, though there is a fateful bond which keeps him where he is.¹² Although the narrator is identified in the story as some one other than the writer, there is ample evidence that Bialik reveals here the deepest secret of his own life, the acute problem of his Jewish identity—the sensitive, creative person who does not know what he is doing in the surroundings which he resents so much, but, nevertheless, is a part of them.

The picture of reality which Bialik paints does suggest a way out. In it, the narrator is sent to a new teacher who “is a great artist.” Significantly, the teacher’s name is Rabbi Meir, a name denoting the spreading of light—the enlightener. Judaism is then presented to the boy in three dimensions, as real, meaningful, and as something which is both near and immediate. Thus, he is able to grasp historical Judaism, though thousands of years and thousands of miles removed, as something vivacious, viable.

It is only when a concept of Jewish identity and of a Jewish entity is finally formed that the gap between the individual Jew and his Jewish society, between his subjective world and the objective world about him, is apparently bridged.¹³ The bridge is based on historical Judaism, an understanding of the historical processes within Judaism and the Jews. The historical past is viewed as related to the present through cultural bonds, and only through the transmission of cultural values can contemporary Jews be esteemed by the narrator.

To Bialik, the notion of Jewish identity is a cultural and an intellectual one, stemming from a common heritage. Only a re-definition of Judaism as a cultural entity would bring the poet closer to his people.

Undoubtedly, Bialik was a proud, conscientious, nationalist Jew for whom assimilation was completely ruled out. The result of cultural and religious assimilation was a great disappointment to those who had forsaken Jewish culture and an even greater loss to the Jewish people. His attitude to the non-Jews is a natural one. He would not glorify them or their culture just because they are non-Jewish, yet those attempting to destroy the Jewish people physically and spiritually became the target of his wrath.

Bialik was a secular man longing for his paradise lost, that paradise which contained the purity and a sense of the holiness of his childhood which, he knows, can never be regained. That close proximity with God which he experienced as a child is lost and can never be experienced again. The world of the Jews in the caravan (*Shayarah*) which he depicts in all of its ugliness, coarseness, vulgarity, and ruthlessness, has conquered his personal world of poetry (*Shirah*).¹⁴ *Shayarah* versus *Shirah* is the great

12. Cf. Baruch Kurtzweil, *Bialik Ve-Tschernichovsky* (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv, 1960), pp. 3-22 (Hebrew).

13. Cf. Miriam Preminger, “Iyun Besafi’ah,” *Moznayim*, XXI (June-November, 1965), pp. 132-141 (Hebrew).

14. Cf. Hillel Barzel, *Meshorerim 'Al Shirah*, I (Tel Aviv, 1970), pp. 40-45 (Hebrew).

tragedy of Bialik. Nevertheless, there is a note of hope, for a re-definition of Judaism is not only possible, but is, indeed, indispensable.

The age of the modern Hebrew renaissance is a cultural one. Bialik believed in the uniqueness and greatness of the Jewish genius as expressed in the literature which the Jewish people created throughout the ages. As a matter of fact, he compiled and edited some of the classical Hebrew works in order to make them available to the modern Jew. Thus, Bialik contributed his share to the re-birth of the Jewish spirit, which, he believed, should precede the re-birth of the Jewish nation. Fortifying himself in the fortress of the spirit was, for him, more than just a slogan; it was his plan for the cultural renaissance of Judaism.

AGNON: JUDAISM AS A CULTURE—WITHIN RELIGION

The third author to highlight the problem of Jewish identity in contemporary Hebrew letters is Shmuel Yoseph Agnon (1888-1970). A Nobel Prize laureate, the first and, (so far), only Hebrew writer to be thus recognized, Agnon illustrates the Jewish experience of the last two hundred years. He unfolds the life of the Jews from the time prior to Eichel (who, by the way, appears in one of his less known stories "*Leveit Aba*") to the post-Bialik period, in scenes that range from eastern Europe through western Europe to Erez Yisra'el.

Agnon, in his private life, was a religious, observant Jew, and his profession of faith is, indeed, apparent in his writings. However, there is no doubt that he was a modern writer, experiencing and expressing the basic problems of the modern Jew. His manner of presentation can mislead the reader to assume that Agnon is a writer of the old school, for he developed his own style by adopting some classical forms of Mishnaic Hebrew along with a style that had flourished in Hasidic writings. His themes, too, may mislead the reader to consider Agnon as representing the traditional life of the past. While this may be true with regard to *Bilvav Yamim* (In the Heart of the Seas) and *Hakhnasat Kalah* (The Bridal Canopy), in *Ore'ah Natah Lalun* (A Guest for the Night) the quest for one's identity and for the meaning of the past is already subtly introduced. Indeed, one may find nostalgia in Agnon, but one also finds nightmare. This is especially true in many of his short stories in *Sefer Hama'asim* (The Book of Deeds). Indeed, it is this ambiguity of religiosity and secularism that is most characteristic of some of Agnon's writings. Of course, this combination makes him even more interesting to the student of Jewish identity. In order to escape the superficial treatment of such a complex and intricate subject as the writings of Agnon, I have selected one particular story in which the subject of Judaism in the modern age is the most dominant theme. It is "A Whole Loaf" (*Pat Shlemah*), written, in 1932.

In the story, a first-person narrator tells about his loneliness. His wife and children have gone abroad, and he has to take care of himself. It is Shabbat, a day of holiness, yet the narrator has not eaten anything and,

obviously, has not sanctified the day appropriately. He goes out to look for a place to eat. On his way, he meets an old man, Doctor Yekutiel Ne'eman, a very wise man whose words are very pleasant. Doctor Ne'eman asks him about his wife and children, and upon hearing that they are abroad, reproaches the narrator. In order to change the subject, the narrator starts to praise Ne'eman's book.

This was a book about which opinions were largely divided. There are some scholars who say that whatever is written in it as from the mouth of the Lord (. . .) was written by Yekutiel Ne'eman, who neither added nor took away anything from his words. And that is what Yekutiel Ne'eman declares. But there are some who say this is certainly not the case, and that Ne'eman wrote it all himself and ascribed his words to a certain lord whom no man ever saw.¹⁵

The narrator adds that, since the book has become known, the world has become slightly better. He praises the book, yet Ne'eman is not overly impressed. He finally hands the narrator a packet of letters that are to be taken to the post office and sent by registered mail.

The narrator undertakes the mission, but there are many obstacles on his way: first and foremost, he is hungry and he wants to eat. But fearing that he might betray his mission, he hesitates to satisfy his hunger. When he actually comes near the post office, another obstacle appears, in the person of Mr. Gressler, the antithesis of Ne'eman. As a result, he does not deliver the letters, but, later on, enters a hotel's dining room where he orders a whole loaf of bread. Hours pass; everyone is being served except the narrator who wants the whole loaf. His hunger still unsatisfied, he sits and waits for the waiters to bring him the whole loaf. The restaurant is closed, but he remains there overnight. He is still hungry, and he has not yet delivered Ne'eman's letters either.

Agnon represents the third example of a literary search for some Jewish identity. The protagonist is not observing the Sabbath as customary; being removed from his family represents a state of sinfulness, or at least an undesired state. Doctor Yekutiel Ne'eman undoubtedly represents the figure of Moshe, the law giver. In the Midrash, the name Yekutiel refers to Moshe. Ne'eman, meaning trustworthy, is a term which is also applied to Moshe in the Bible and elsewhere: "*Ne'eman beito*," the trustee of his house. The book which he has brought to the world is unmistakably the Torah, the authorship of which is in debate. The expression which Agnon uses, "the Lord (. . .)," is a conspicuous reference to the Tetragrammaton Yahweh, spelled in Hebrew in four letters: *Yod Hei Vav Hei*.¹⁶ Yekutiel-Moshe is committing the protagonist to fulfill some mission for him. Yet the protagonist does not know what the letters

15. Sholom J. Kahn, ed., *A Whole Loaf* (New York, 1957?), p. 318.

16. Cf. Baruch Kurtzweil, *Masot 'Al Sipurei Agnon* (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv, 1962), pp. 86-95 (Hebrew).

are all about, and why he is supposed to mail them. He can only rationalize about the importance of the mission. The letters undoubtedly symbolize the commandments.

On the other hand, there is Gressler, the embodiment of Satan, Mephistopheles, by whom the protagonist is attracted and who prevents him from fulfilling his mission of mailing the letters. The whole loaf, that *Pat Shlemah*, which the protagonist wants, can be interpreted in a number of ways, (an endeavor which has kept a few students of Agnon on their toes). *Pat Shlemah* may be regarded as a religious object, which the protagonist missed on the Sabbath: the two whole loaves of bread. Or else it may be interpreted as his desire for paganism, outside of the Jewish spheres.¹⁷

Agnon's protagonist is a modern Jew in search of his identity, of his cultural and religious essence. For the time being he possesses none of them. Although he lives in the midst of holiness, in the holy city of Jerusalem, the city of God, which is depicted as having been transformed into a secular city, he is not actively engaged in any true religious experience. He does not observe any of the Sabbath rituals. Indeed, to him, the day of holiness, too, is an utterly secular point in time. In the presence of the representative of God, the protagonist admits and accepts the authenticity of the religious code, whereupon he is called to act, to fulfill a religious duty. He is hesitant to perform it, rationalizing, as the modern Jew does, about the necessity and the obligation to perform the religious deed. Need, his urge to satisfy his hunger, is battling with the religious commandment.

On his way to the post office he comes to a synagogue where the worshippers are mourning the death of Moshe. It is the seventh of Adar, the traditional memorial day for Moshe. Agnon skillfully portrays the ironic scene of traditional Judaism reverting to the death of Moshe while the living Moshe—Doctor Yekutiel Ne'eman—is forgotten.¹⁸ Traditional Jews are experiencing the past while ignoring the living aspects of Judaism. The protagonist leaves the synagogue for he has not found in it what he is looking for. But what is he looking for? The answer to this question lies in his yearning for a whole loaf. He already makes a compromise by asking for only one loaf. However, he would like the loaf to be given to him in the hotel's dining room, which is depicted as representing the outside world, the other culture. According to one interpretation, the protagonist is looking for his wholesome Jewishness in a foreign place. He wishes to have his Jewish values, yet he practices them in a non-Jewish

17. See Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1968), pp. 189-201; Abraham Holz, "Studies in S. J. Agnon's 'Pat Shlema'," *Hasifrut*, III (No. 2, November, 1971), pp. 295-311 (Hebrew; an English summary, p. IX).

18. Cf. Rivkah Hurwitz, "Ikuv Hashliḥut," *Moznayim*, XXVII (No. 3-4, August-September, 1968), pp. 180-181 (Hebrew).

milieu. According to another interpretation, he cannot achieve his desire to enjoy the benefits of the non-Jewish world.

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Upon reviewing these three paradigms for Jewish identity we may propose the following observations: Euchel's Jew, who aspired to achieve recognition of the outside world, finally, after some two hundred terrible years, years of trial and error, has succeeded in gaining emancipation. Bialik's cultural re-definition of Judaism has been attempted. It is, however, the message which we find in Agnon's story that the modern Jew is far from possessing a satisfactory answer to his Jewish identity. The modern Jew cannot have a whole loaf and eat it at a high-class foreign restaurant.

True, Agnon does not represent the general secular—or, rather, atraditional—tendencies in contemporary Hebrew literature. Thus, his conclusion does not reflect the general attitude of the majority of Israeli writers. Yet, in the case of Agnon, I believe that his message is very meaningful in the light of the attempts by previous generations to re-define Judaism. The state of the protagonist does represent the quest of the modern Jew for his identity.

In summary: Euchel attempted to shape the external aspects of Judaism in accordance with European culture; hence, his preoccupation with the observance of the religious commandments. The major factor in shaping his viewpoint stemmed from the outside, from European culture and values. That is why he emphasized the ideas of universalism, cosmopolitanism and humanism as being the main tenets of Enlightenment Judaism. Bialik, on the other hand, was looking inward, trying to find the uniqueness and greatness of Judaism as a culture which, by itself, is self-sufficient and self-contained. Thus, Bialik was less concerned with the external aspects of Judaism and with the observance of the commandments than he was with the intrinsic values of the Jewish heritage. It stands to reason that he stressed Jewish nationalism over Enlightenment cosmopolitanism. Agnon seems to project the antithesis to Bialik. According to him, Judaism as a culture apparently must remain within the religious framework. For Judaism, to Agnon, can never be attained in a secularistic context. Jewish nationalism, too, as may be seen from his point-of-view, is part and parcel of traditional, normative Judaism. In a way, Agnon replied to the very difficult question expressed by Euchel: In order for the Jew to maintain his Jewish identity, he must remain within the framework of traditional Judaism. However, Agnon was sensitive enough to know that the modern, atraditional Jew desires very much to retain his Jewish identity, but has difficulties finding his satisfaction within the norms of traditional Judaism.

The answer which Agnon arrives at is phrased in the negative. The search for a satisfactory definition of Judaism in the modern, secular age

goes on, and will continue to go on as long as Judaism and Jews will survive. Survival, I believe, is an act of change, and Judaism has survived in the past because it has been in a continuous process of change. Talmudic Judaism is different from Biblical Judaism as both are from medieval Judaism, although it must be stressed that, in common, they all have many basic concepts and values that tie them together.

Since the figure of Moshe has been raised here in our discussion of Jewish identity, perhaps it is appropriate to illustrate the point from the vast literature of Jewish heritage. There is a very interesting Midrash about Moshe whom God took to the academy of Rabbi Akiva in the 2nd century C.E. Moshe got there and listened to the Talmudic discussions about the meaning of the rules of the Torah, but he, Moshe, the giver of the Torah, was unable to understand anything. Indeed, Judaism was changing. In the last two hundred years we have witnessed the emergence of the Reform and the Conservative movements in Judaism. Moreover, we can discern the changes that have taken place even within so-called Jewish Orthodoxy. If there is a definition of Jewish identity, it is no longer absolute, just as Judaism, by itself, has become a relative concept. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, Jewish identity is increasingly being identified practically in terms of the individual Jew's relation to the Jewish State of Israel.

In conclusion: the question of Jewish identity remains an open question as ever. In the age of secularism, of alienation and of the disappearance of values, the modern Jew finds himself very much like the protagonist of Agnon in the end of the story. To use Agnon's beautiful, symbolic, albeit alarming words: "I was all alone at that time. My wife and children were out of the country, and all the bother of my food fell on me alone."

We regret to announce the passing of

DR. SINAI UCKO

distinguished Israeli religious thinker and
educator and an honored member of the
Board of Contributing Editors of JUDAISM.

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