

BREAKDOWN IN MENDELE AND AGNON

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Mendele was the chief Hebrew influence on Agnon, most clearly in the first half of Agnon's career, when he wrote Hakhnasat Kallah.¹ But this influence was not confined to style and narrative technique alone, but included psychological elements commonly put down to the impact of Freud or Kafka. Mendele's works prepared the ground not only for Hakhnasat Kallah but also, to some extent, for Sefer ha-Ma'asim and Sippur Pashut, works which superficially appear to mark a radical point of departure from anything written in Hebrew previously.

Mendele was Agnon's pre-eminent model of literary excellence in Hebrew. Hebrew, of course, is not the language of most of Agnon's characters, but he creates the illusion that it is - he learned this from Mendele. Agnon's use of biblical and rabbinic sources to create a new, distinctive style would hardly have been as successful as it was without Mendele. In his recent survey of modern Hebrew fiction, Gershon Shaked puts Mendele on a higher plane than Agnon in this regard: "No Hebrew writer is more original [than Mendele] in the use of the riches of the Hebrew language".²

The nature of Mendele's influence on Agnon as a young man may be illustrated by comparing the heroes of Mendele's Masot Binyamin ha-Shlishi and Agnon's Hakhnasat Kallah. Agnon's Reb Yudel is a more ambitious version of Mendele's Benjamin the Third. Both are pious shtetl characters, luftmenschen who leave their families and set out on a comic, eventful quest through the villages of eastern Europe. On the day when he starts his travels, Reb Yudel is overcome by the beauty of God's world and cannot help but sing:

"When he finished his prayers he stretched his legs out one on top of the other, looked at the world around him and began to sing 'Adon Olam,' nodding his head to the passers-by, the circumcised and the uncircumcised alike, wondering at the great light that the Lord,³ blessed be He, had spread out and adorned the world in His kindness."

An identical scene is described by Mendele: on the morning when Benjamin leaves Batlon, he, too, is overwhelmed by the world of nature and breaks into song:

"Benjamin was so happy that his lips opened of their own accord - and the poem 'Melekh Elyon' came from his throat in a fine trill. His joyous soul blended with the chirping of the birds and crickets and the hum of flies, and rose loudly, a song to the King of Glory in the highest heaven."⁴

Few critics would deny that Agnon's use of the picaresque style in Hakhnasat Kallah owes much to Masot Binyamin ha-Shlishi. Cervantes' Don Quixote is clearly the inspiration behind both novels, but Mendele effectively set the artistic standard for the depiction of a quixotic Jew against which Agnon had to measure himself.

An equally obvious influence of Mendele's may be seen in Agnon's use of the persona of an orthodox Jew. "Perhaps Agnon's greatest achievement," writes Arnold Band, "lies in his maintaining the illusion that the narrator is a guileless believer simply spinning a pious tale while he is really an accomplished artist, well in control of his subject matter."⁵ Whether or not this was, in fact, Agnon's 'greatest achievement,' he was following a road originally paved by Mendele. For Mendele, the pious bookseller, is also a persona, "a traveller disguised," as Dan Miron puts it, a sophisticated, deeply divided artist.⁶

To these possible influences, we may add certain isolated passages in Mendele's stories which anticipate Agnon. In some cases, the similarities between the two writers may be owing not to a direct influence of Mendele on Agnon, but to the shared influence of traditional or secular sources, or to coincidence. Yet, we may assume that, at least to some extent, there was a direct or indirect influence.

The main characters of Mendele and Agnon are mostly cripples and misfits, outsiders and emotionally disturbed. "The extent to which life is not whole and pleasant," writes Mendele in the "Introduction" to his semi-biographical memoir, Ba-Yamim ha-Hem, "- that, in the end, is the essence of reality."⁷ Most of Agnon's protagonists are agunot, in the distinctive sense in which Agnon uses the word - souls doomed in their search for wholeness and fulfilment, anchored to their emotional infirmity. His keynote story is that which gave Agnon his pseudonym, "Agunot." Images such as the wandering souls or the broken thread in "Agunot,"⁸ symbolizing human discord, trauma and alienation, have parallels in Mendele.

Other elements in Agnon are also foreshadowed in miniature by Mendele. For example, Mendele's extraordinary analogy between the urge to emigrate to Eretz Yisrael and the urge of a rabid dog to bite encapsulates Agnon's nihilistic account of the Zionist dream, in Temol Shilshom:

"Pestilence afflicts not only men's bodies but sometimes also their souls. Some are plagued like mad dogs, God protect us - foaming at the mouth, stinking, full of fury, burning to bite... Some lose their minds. They see things upside down, they change good for evil, light for darkness, white for black... This plague, which the Lord, blessed be He, brought

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upon us, drove us, in a relentless, extraordinary way. It made our imagination fly off, like an arrow from a bow, until it seemed a trifle to cross the sea, no harder than lifting a hair out of milk."

Similarly, in Mendele's Be-Emek ha-Bakha, Hirshl's comparison between his father and the messiah looks forward to Agnon's "Ha-Mitpahat:" "Hirshl imagined all the Kislonites waiting for his father, as if for the messiah."¹⁰ Later, on the eve of his father's final illness and death, Hirshl is compared to a rooster on erev Yom Kippur, an analogy which brings to mind Agnon's Sippur Pashut.¹¹

There is reason to suspect that psychological features of Agnon's depiction of his characters also derive, consciously or otherwise, from Mendele. In particular, Agnon's account of Hirshl's breakdown in Sippur Pashut might have been influenced by Mendele's Susati. In several respects, these works differ from one another, in setting, characterization, narrative technique and social purpose. In contrast with Sippur Pashut, Susati is overtly an allegory of Jewish suffering in the Pale of Settlement, set against the background of Russian anti-Semitism. Yet, both novels are, at their core, studies of mental illness: both depict young men undergoing breakdown in which they have nightmares of being a slaughtered cock, a kapparrah.

As studies of breakdown, the two novels are pivotal in the writings of Mendele and Agnon. The instability of the hero in both works is pervasive in other writings of the two authors. The similarity between Israel, the main character in Susati, and Mendele himself is particularly worth noting. In the long story "Bi-Yshivah shel Ma'alah uvi-Yshivah shel Matah," Mendele confesses his lack of emotional stability:

"... sometimes, when I'm alone and engaged in soul-searching, when I judge my deeds, my feelings and thoughts, I am left astounded, doubtful of my own sanity. The mind is home to many forces, each with its own function, with its hidden power, with its soul of its own, emerging into a variety of conflicting emotions. There is no characteristic which does not have its opposite. At times they live in harmony... but at other times they contend one with the other, making tumult within as in a mad-house, one feeling rapidly changing into another, constantly changing, conflicting."¹³

In some respects, Israel is a younger incarnation of Mendele in much the same way as Hirshl Horowitz appears psychologically to be a younger version of Samuel in Oreah Natah la-Lun or Herbst in Shirah.¹⁴ Israel's madness, by implication, is a normal means of adaptation, perhaps the only way by which awful truths might be faced and expressed. Israel, in his twenties and still living with his widowed mother, longs to be a man and to escape the shtetl. He prepares for examinations to enter university and study medicine. Worn down by the pressure of study and isolation, he goes into the fields one day and has hallucinations in which he talks to a mare and she replies. These conversations are entirely rational and much wisdom emerges from them. But Israel also shows signs of paranoid schizophrenia: he has hallucinations of falling

and disembodiment, of child-like omnipotence alternating with helplessness; he doubts the reality of things, including his sexual identity; he imagines men transformed to beasts and talks with animals. In addition, he has fantasies of being the possible reincarnation of such persons as King Solomon, Judah Maccabeus, or the Queen of Sheba, and he imagines that he is controlled by an inimical outer force:

"... I doubted my own existence. Perhaps I wasn't myself. Perhaps I was enslaved to another power living within me and I had no control over myself, my thoughts, my actions, but this being forced me to act against my will to my harm, to live his own life as he once lived it."¹⁵

After recovering somewhat with the aid of an exorcist, Israel is still resolved to enter university and escape the dreaded life of a luftmensch. His oral examination is a nightmare in itself. That night he has continual nightmares of being a sacrificial cock:

"Eyes watched me in reproach and anger, and the game began, a terrifying game! The players took their parts: some as donkies, oxen or human beings, and I played the role of rooster, bound at their mercy, a sacrifice for the Day of Atonement!"¹⁶

This nightmare is a prelude to Israel's possession by the Devil, in which his social and sexual crisis becomes merged with his role as a symbol of the Jewish people. In the end, his problems remain unsolved, though he does recover his sanity and gain insight into his predicament.

Sippur Pashut is a similarly unresolved story of an unhappy family producing a schizophrenic son, although the father is still alive and the son's madness is precipitated not by personal failure but by his marriage. However, Hirshl's madness, like that of Israel, derives largely from his suppressed, intumed anger which finds expression in the nightmare of being a sacrificial rooster.

Hirshl's murderous rage at his wife is clearly linked to his tortured bond with his mother, who has engineered this loveless marriage. Hirshl has no way of handling this anger other than turning it on himself. He develops an insane fear of slaughtering roosters and of being a slaughtered rooster. We are told by the narrator that Hirshl hides his knife at night in order to protect himself from his sado-masochistic impulses:

"A man is not in control when he is angry. Suddenly he could get up and kill all the roosters in the world. Hirshl did well to hide his knife at night."¹⁷

Like Israel, Hirshl in madness has a sense of disembodiment and of not being in control of his destiny: his sexual identity, too, appears to be distorted; Hirshl deliriously addresses trees as Israel addresses animals, as if they were superior creatures; when discovered raving in the fields, Hirshl pleads, "Don't slaughter me, I'm not a rooster."¹⁸

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In his analysis of the rooster imagery in Agnon, Baruch Kurzweil calls attention to the fact that the word for rooster, gever, is the same as that for man: Hirshl's terror of being a slaughtered cock could symbolize his fear of emaculation or his sense of having been emasculated. Kurzweil's interpretation is equally applicable to Israel in Susati. Indeed, the entire work can be read as an allegory of emasculation as the mare, the symbol of the Jewish people, was once a prince whose sex was changed through persecution and misfortune.²⁰ That Mendele was fully conscious of his use of the cock as symbol of the manhood to which Israel aspires is clear in his depiction of Israel's madness. During a temporary remission, Israel is told of his peculiar behaviour when mad: he meets a cock, bows down to it and addresses it as gever, a man of valour, implicitly contrasting it with his own weakness and ineffectuality.²¹

There is, to my knowledge, no evidence of a direct influence here. Yet, when one considers Agnon's self-confessed admiration for Mendele, as well as Mendele's fame prior to World War Two and the relatively limited quantity of outstanding Hebrew fiction written before the mid-1930's, when Agnon wrote Sippur Pashut, it does seem that this similarity was more than mere coincidence.

It is true, of course, that Mendele and Agnon are different in many ways. Agnon was more familiar than Mendele with Western European culture and behaviour. Mendele's anti-traditionalism and social realism often contrast with Agnon's neo-Romanticism and his adherence to tradition. Unlike Mendele, Agnon does not think in abstract, allegorical terms. Yet, Mendele's influence on Agnon may be seen not just in Agnon's style and technique, but also, to an extent, in his psychological characterization.

On this, the 150th anniversary of Mendele's birth, the time is ripe for a reevaluation of Mendele's influence on Agnon and other Hebrew writers and of his place in modern Hebrew literature.

Notes

1. "No one writing in Hebrew in the 1920's concerning Eastern European Jewry of the early-nineteenth century and using the various plot features of Hakhnasat Kallah could possibly do so without confronting Mendele psychologically and ideologically." Arnold Band, Nostalgia and Nightmare: a Study in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon, p. 130. Also, see Bialik on Agnon's debt to Mendele, Devarim she-Be'al Peh, vol 2, p. 21. At the same time, Agnon may be contrasted with Mendele. See Dov Sadan, Al Shai Agnon, p. 18f., and Baruch Kurzweil, Masot al Sippure S.Y. Agnon, p. 9ff.
2. Gershon Shaked, Ha-Sipporet ha-Ivrit 1880-1970, vol. 1, p. 99.

3. Kol Sippurav shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon, 2nd edn., vol 1, p. 11. Quotations are taken from this edition. All translations are by David Aberbach.
4. Kol Kitve Mendele Mokher Sefarim, p. 65.
5. Band, op. cit., p. 102.
6. "Whatever and whoever Mendele is, he is also a humanist and an apostate. He can by no means be regarded as a genuine member of the traditional Jewish community. His beard, sidelocks, and old-fashioned gaberdine are a mask... He will always look like a perfectly acceptable member of traditional Jewish society, and yet he will always dissociate himself from this society and subject it to his ironic, distanced observation." Dan Miron, A Traveler Disguised, pp. 148, 267. These observations on Mendele as a Yiddish writer are equally true of him as a Hebrew writer. The Hebrew versions of Mendele's writings are, for the most part, identical in content with the Yiddish drafts. Agnon would have been familiar with the Yiddish drafts, but was primarily influenced by Mendele as a Hebrew writer.
7. Kol Kitve Mendele Mokher Sefarim, p. 258.
8. On the wandering souls, see Mendele's "Bi-Yme ha-Ra'ash," Kol Kitve, p. 416; and Kol Sippure Shmuel Yosef Agnon, vol. 2, p. 415. The image of the thread as applied to the Jewish people appears in Mendele's Be-Emek ha-Bakha, Kol Kitve, p. 160.
9. In "Bi-Yme ha-Ra'ash," Kol Kitve Mendele Mokher Sefarim, p. 407.
10. Ibid., p. 161.
11. Ibid., p. 168.
12. On this and other psychological themes in Agnon, see David Aberbach, At the Handles of the Lock: Themes in the Fiction of S.J. Agnon.
13. Kol Kitve Mendele Mokher Sefarim, p. 427.
14. Similarities between Mendele and other characters, including Israel in Susati, are discussed by David Aberbach in a forthcoming monograph. The influence of writers other than Mendele on Agnon's depiction of madness should not be ignored: the works of Brenner offer a number of cases which Agnon knew well.
15. Kol Kitve Mendele Mokher Sefarim, p. 315. For a recent summary of views on schizophrenia, see Michael Gelder, et al., Oxford Textbook of Psychiatry. The impairment of insight usually found among schizophrenics (ibid., p. 231) is reversed in Susati and, to an

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extent, also in Sippur Pashut, suggesting that the madness in both works is transient and curable.

16. Kol Kitve Mendele Mokher Sefarim, p. 320. On the Jew as cock in the Weltanschauung of Hirshl in Be-Emek ha-Bakha, see Kol Kitve, p. 149.

17. Kol Sippurav shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon, vol. 3, p. 201.

18. Ibid., p. 218.

19. Kurzweil, op. cit., p. 216ff.

20. Kol Kitve Mendele Mokher Sefarim, p. 312.

21. Ibid., p. 318.

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