

**SH. Y. AGNON'S COMMUNITY RHETORIC:
THE HEROISM AND CRISIS OF POWER IN TWO TALES OF
GABBAIS (TREASURERS) FROM *IR U-MELOAH* (THE CITY AND
ALL IT HAS IN IT)**

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Agnon's Buchach stories, which were posthumously collected in the monumental volume *Ir U-meloah*, being written in the perspective of the Holocaust and two World Wars, provide the boldest and finest representation of the cultural crisis in the twentieth century, and the deepest insight in its inner mechanisms. The current article is focused on one of them: the crisis of power and leadership—in the Jewish community as well as in the surrounding culture. However, the simple conception of the generations' decline, supported, for example, by Shulamit Almog in her work *City, Law, Story*, is hardly applicable to the book, and the whole picture is supposedly much more complicated.

1. "REB ZVI FROM THE DYNASTY OF ZVI"

When in his account of one of the gabbais of Buchach, "Reb Zvi from the race of Zvi," Agnon declares, "I will reveal; I will conceal nothing,"¹ he is pointing out a golden opportunity to speak candidly to his readers. However, a declaration of sincerity is not yet itself sincerity. Agnon does a simulation of sincerity and even takes pains to reveal the ruse of simulation in a seeming act of ultimate candor. The candor is supposed to appear as a deviation from the discursive norm, a transgression, the breaking of a taboo.² It is doubtful if after 200 years of Enlightenment literature with its acerbic criticism and satire of life in the shtetel, Agnon was genuinely trying to impress the reader with his sincerity when he revealed the maladies of the community of Buchach.³ We are similarly unimpressed by the seeming contradic-

¹ Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa* (Jerusalem: Schocken Press, 1999), p. 129. All the quotations from Agnon are my translation.

² For the extensive discussions on rhetoric of sincerity in literature see, for example, H. Peyre, *Literature and Sincerity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963); M. Brinker, *Ad ha-Simta ha-Tverianit* (To the Tiberian alley; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1989); E. van Alphen, M. Bal, and C. E. Smith, eds., *The Rhetoric of Sincerity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008).

³ On Agnon's satire see Y. Friedlander, "Ha-maarag ha-satiri be-sippurim 'Ha-tzfardeim' ve-'Mazal dagim' meet Sh. Y. Agnon" (The satirical weave in the Sh. Y. Agnon stories "The Frogs" and "Pisces"), in *Bein Halacha le-Haskala* (Between Halacha and Enlightenment; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2004), pp. 336–351; Y. Friedlander, "'Be-neareinu u-vi-zkeneinu' le-Sh. Y. Agnon: rekhivim dekadentium u-

tion between the author's ostensible intention to erect a monument to his hometown and the critical tone of the book. Agnon has no intention of erecting a monument: a monument is mute, and facing it, we are powerless to do anything but remain mute. No, Agnon wishes to speak, to converse—in order to change and to persuade. Commemoration cannot tolerate ambiguity. In contrast, discourse is always a game. Therefore, I fear that the scholars of *Ir U-meloah* such as Shulamit Almog have too readily accepted the narrator's declaration, "I will reveal; I will conceal nothing," as an expression of sincerity.⁴ Agnon does not expect the reader to accept his declaration; he wants him to join the game. Naturally Agnon's criticism will come at the right place and the opportune time, at the perfect *kairos*, yet still unexpected and therefore the more powerful and convincing. But meanwhile the declaration, "I will reveal; I will conceal nothing," sounds more like a parody, a satire of a satire.

Moreover, this statement comes in the middle of a story which is entirely composed of deceptive appearances, simulations, types of optical illusions. If it has any meaning at all, it is referring not to Agnon's social critique of the community but to his philosophical, psycho-cultural thought. Here are just a few pieces of evidence. Reb Zvi is from the dynasty of Zvi—but the narrator immediately justifies himself and claims that the dynasty, that is, the family lineage, does not interest him at all. His father-in-law seems at first to be a wealthy man, and afterward it becomes clear that he is not. Reb Zvi's father, Reb Neta, was a shopkeeper—but only for the sake of appearance, because in fact he "was absorbed in his study,"⁵ abandoned his post, and consequently the shop was burglarized. The bread of Reb Issachar, Reb Zvi's in-law, is not actual bread because it was not baked from wheat which he ground but rather from wheat that his wife takes on credit from the neighbors. And if Reb Zvi's father finally meets a genuine wealthy man and offers his daughter in marriage, then as his strongest argument, he presents the possibility that Reb Zvi will be appointed to be the rabbi, and this, too, is not a real rabbinical post but a fraudulent one since it can be purchased. *Pilpul* [Talmudic debate] is a "vain piece of sophistry," *hidush* [new idea] is "a new interpretation of vanity."⁶

menipeim" ("With our young and with our old" by Sh. Y. Agnon: decadent and menippean elements), *Yerushalaim* 22 (2005): 11–22.

⁴ See Sh. Almog, *Ir, Mishpat, Sippur: Makom Ha-mishpat b'ir U-Meloah shel Sh. Y. Agnon* (City, law, story: Place of justice in Sh. Y. Agnon's *Ir U-Meloah*; Jerusalem: Schocken, 2002).

⁵ Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa*, p. 128.

⁶ Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa*, p. 129.

In the background appears the narrator's declaration, "I will reveal; I will conceal nothing," not as an expression of exhibitionism or maniacal obsession with criticism and eliminating pretense but as an invitation to a genuine conversation: Why do people desert their public roles? Why does the public image crumble and reveal itself a fraud? Why does the epideictic discourse of polemic and innovation—*pilpul* and *hidush*—those features which are the very heart and soul of Jewish culture, become empty of meaning? In other words, why does a joyous, prolific vitality of culture become an embarrassing, futile debauchery, frustrating and useless?

The portrait depicted here is, in the words of Richard Sennett, the fall of public man.⁷ No, Agnon is not referring to the moral decline of man, as Shulamit Almog presumes, nor to a singular malady afflicting the Jewish community. He is not referring to any malady. Any generalization about the community and its history would be superfluous and misguided, not to say tendentious and limited, because Agnon took pains to neutralize any line of persuasion of his own precisely in order to pre-empt and to prevent any attempt to engage his text for one ideological purpose or another.

Agnon invited the reader to a personal conversation, and if there is room for a polemical tone, then it will spring from the unique personality of one character or another and not from the vehement generalizations about society.⁸ Comments of social criticism are always rooted in personal contexts related to particular characters, as if to show that the limitations of all of the contexts are balanced out by the comments of the defense, both personal and community, a distortion accompanied by a rectification. It is here, and only here, that the genuine mythicism of the Agnonian text is anchored: any mimetic attempt to reflect life—the social, ethical, historical order—is embodied in a unique living personality and in its concrete, one-time and not-universal narrative.⁹ Agnon's community rhetoric, like all authentic rhetoric, is not party propaganda with a social (or even moral) agenda of one kind or another, but the art of establishing unique, human characters sufficiently alive and convincing so that the reader can identify with them, can choose to live their myth.

⁷ R. Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

⁸ See comments by Hillel Barzel on the Agnonian polyphony, where nearly every character speaks in its own distinctive voice: H. Barzel, *Ha-meiah Ha-hatzuya* (The split century; Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 2011), pp. 254–256.

⁹ A myth is defined in Aleksei Losev's terms as the miraculous history of personality rendered in words, miraculous in the sense of the realization of the transcendental purpose of that personality in empirical history (A. Losev, *The Dialectics of Myth* [trans. V. Marchenkov; New York: Routledge, 2003 (1930)], pp. 185–186).

The story of Reb Zvi and Reb Issachar is indeed the story of the fall of public man. But it is also the story of his rehabilitation and renewed ascent. Reb Issachar fails in business, but Reb Zvi rehabilitates it. Because of his vast preoccupation with commerce, Reb Zvi is forced to leave his Talmudic study, but Reb Issachar before his death commands his sons to bring "*nachat ruach*" (gratification)¹⁰ to Reb Zvi at every possible opportunity, and the sons fulfill their father's command. By virtue of this dialectic, Reb Zvi is appointed to be gabbai of the synagogue, since his brother-in-laws lobbied on his behalf with the synagogue's congregation. He was not a successful gabbai, and his appointment was short-lived. But why? "Because he was drawn to his Talmud."¹¹ A successful businessman and a Talmudic scholar, but a failed gabbai—Reb Zvi is a living, complex personality, and therefore, he does not conform to any social theory, not even to Richard Sennett's theory of the fall of the public man.

Public nature in general and particularly Jewish community rabbinic public nature, is a complex affair, and to some extent, even mysterious. Highly personal myths reside at its core. In the public arena, criticality and apologetics mingle unconstrained: they are both presented as being driven by community interests, but each one is made, so it is said, of a different rhetorical material. As for the rhetoric of sincerity, criticism is a double maneuver which blends weak and strong sincerity, that is, the sincerity of exposure and the sincerity of persuasion: the critic presents his achievement in that he exposes a public failing as his own personal failing and thus he achieves the effect of (weak) sincerity.

At the same time, the exposure is presented as a call for change, as a means of persuasion that is supposed to evoke the effect of (strong) sincerity, that is, to create trust and credibility. The exposure ostensibly attests to authenticity; truth is perceived as hiding behind many public masks, and therefore, a personal voice, a sincere unmasker, is required in order to arrive at the truth. Thus, criticalness becomes a synonym for sincerity, authenticity, credibility, and truth. The rhetoric of criticism is a preeminent case of the merging of the public and private spaces. In literature this is almost inevitable; it is the certain way to bring the sincere personal voice of the writer or of his agents into the arena of his community. This tradition goes back to the Books of the Prophets; it is not dependent on an ideological trend or critical paradigm of one kind or another. Therefore, when we speak of Agnon's

¹⁰ Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa*, p. 130.

¹¹ Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa*, p. 132.

community criticalness, one need not seek in it, as Baruch Kurzweil and many others do, the roots of modernity, nor historiosophy, sociological, or moral views. Criticalness is inevitable in the literary depiction of a community as a direct result of merging the two “chemicals,” public and private spheres. Many times it is enlisted to create sincerity or to balance out the apologetic tendency.

Apologetics is also a deconstructed form of discourse; it demands alienation from self in order to see itself from the side, albeit from a position of self-defense and justification. This alienation is the reason that apologists can also create the effect of sincerity but in contrast to criticism, from a direction that aims to heal the rift, to return to self. This maneuver may lead to reducing the effect of sincerity. An apologist always seems more of a stakeholder than a critic—and therefore less sincere. The aspiration to perfection is perceived as a guise—and thus as contrary to sincerity. Criticalness and apologetics are used as effective rhetorical tools in the hands of an artist like Agnon; games of sincerity and credibility are his favorites. The balanced critical-apologetic picture of the community is the by-product of the paradox of personal speech in the public arena.

Reb Zvi is not a successful gabbai, but he is the first whose name reached the town chronicler,¹² the first one with a personalist presence in the community history. A person who has a name also has the right to begin—in an almost arbitrary manner—the professional dynasty of gabbais. Without the individual name, the writer cannot write a community history; without a name, there is no myth. And not only that, the first gabbai (in the mythical, constitutive, rhetorical sense of the word) of the town is not only the subject of the story but he is also the master of the story, the master of the legend. “Reb Zvi would recount,” “Reb Zvi said,” etc., thus five times in two pages.¹³

Agnon is allowing his protagonist to speak. In terms of the rhetoric of sincerity, the narrative function of a legend within a historical or pseudo-historical chronicle is not obvious. Reb Zvi tells a legend about Shem the son of Noah who descends to this world when the sun blessing is recited (every twenty-eight years) and takes part in the blessing with one of the Jewish communities. But what is important is that Reb Zvi attaches the legend to his personal testimony or more precisely, presents the legend as a mythological explanation of a mythical event in his own life, in his child-

¹² Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa*, p. 128.

¹³ Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa*, p. 132–133.

hood: "At that time as I sat on my father's shoulders, I saw an old man recite the blessing in a peculiar voice. I asked, who is that old man? They told me, That's Shem the son of Noah."¹⁴ And even though afterwards, Reb Zvi presents also the rational, psycho-cultural source of this event, its constitutive mythic power remains unchanged.

And Reb Zvi said, Years later they started to doubt the story, that is, that Shem son of Noah actually had come to our town.... If that is the case, so who was that old man? Reb Noah was a *ba'al shem* [miracle worker] and the people in Buchach confused him with Shem son of Noah.¹⁵

Moreover, the report of doubt, presenting a reasonable alternative to the myth, only reinforces the validity of personal testimony and corroborates conclusively the power of its sincerity. The account of the first constitutive event derives the force of its sincerity from several sources: the witness is a child (untainted, honest, naïve, sensitive); the boy's testimony is fed by personal first-hand experience from sensory rather than intellectual experience (the boy is impressed by the old man's unusual voice); this preliminary experience complements and confirms a dialogue with other witnesses, a kind of testimony within a testimony, relying on the authority of the highly-opinioned "adults" (or rather of two opinions: the first time, the legendary explanation and the second time, the rational); and finally at the meta-narrative level, or if you will, inter-narrative level, the sincerity of Reb Zvi's account derives from its similarity to the format of certain revelation events in the Scriptures, such as the first divine revelation to Moses and Samuel with the sounding of the voice and the response as dialogue to it—direct as in the case of Moses, or indirect, as in the case of Samuel who turns to Eli to receive an explanation. This is similar to Reb Zvi in his narrative.

As is well known, "testimony" (*edut*) is another word for revelation. In other words, revelation is perceived as the ultimate authority of credibility, authenticity, and sincerity. The discourse of revelation initializes the work of sincerity. And in reverse, the speech of sincerity reconstructs the constitutive scene of revelation as a true paradigmatic testimony, which has both a revelation of truth as well as an expression of what is not expressed, namely metaphor, both breaking a discourse norm as well as a dialogue and mythopoesis, in short, all of the components of sincerity.

¹⁴ Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa*, p. 132.

¹⁵ Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa*, p. 133.

Reb Zvi embodies the dialectic point of connection of tradition and innovation, past and future. How?—in a symbolic unity of two elements from his memories of his first experience of reciting the blessing of the sun. On that occasion he was four years old, and he ostensibly saw Shem son of Noah while seated on his father's shoulders: the dynasty of fathers and gabbais stand behind him, like waves washing to the shore, bringing him to his destiny in the present, but we do not see them. They are anonymous; they are the pre-history of gabbais in Buchach. The past is identified with anonymity. Anyone who has a name, a narrative, a statement, an interpretation, a *pilpul*—lives in the eternal present of the Jewish scholastic discourse. The future is built as a possible solution to a question, as a possibility of a new idea. The structure of time mimics the structure of the scholastic syllogism, the structure of rhetoric. The past is what no one can say or study, the present is what they have said, or more precisely, what the sages have said. The future is what I might say as I sit on their shoulders.

The second element is the blessing of the sun itself—the event that connects Genesis time, the time before time was created, with present time. This is a very rare blessing, recited only once in twenty-eight years when the sun stands in the exact position that it was when God created the world. The blessing marks the entry of creation into history, without which the biblical story of creation and the natural act of creation would remain mythological fossils. The renewed signification, giving a name, the sanctification—re-signification—innovation is what transforms the anonymous mechanism into a living time. Reb Zvi, too: He is the person for whom a standard profession, a prosaic community position becomes a professional dynasty, a guild with a history of its own. It is important to emphasize that it is the first gabbai, of all people, who is the least successful professionally, thus refuting the theory of *yeridat hadorot* (the decline of later generations in comparison with those of the past) in the Buchach community.

Twice in this story, there is the phenomenon of confusing names due to the problem of identifying a historical figure: Shem ben Noah and Noah ba'al shem, the wealthy man Reb Zvi from the dynasty of Zvi and the Gaon Reb Zvi, scion of a dynasty of Talmudic scholars and kabbalists. Agnon is playing a game of mirrors here, as scholars sometimes term it: *mis en abyme*—placing into infinity, seeing an infinite reproduction of one's image in two mirrors which are placed facing each other. Particularly in the first case, when the name becomes a fractal for a recursive replication of itself: The name (*shem*) is Shem. In this case, both names are revealed actually as

metaphoric metaboles¹⁶ of the sentence “*Le-Noah yesh shem*” (Noah has a shem = Shem = name), based on the functional isomorphic assumption of the same words used to express paternity and ownership. The second game is also interesting: Zvi is of the lineage of Zvi, and while the narrator does not know what lineage this is,¹⁷ it turns out that the lineage is a tautology of names of all Zvis: Reb Zvi is Reb Zvi. Ultimately Agnon resolves all of these puzzles and puts everything in its proper place.

If so, what purpose was served by these linguistic games apart from the credibility (real or fabricated) of the historical account? This game of mirrors (*mis en abyme*) was designed to turn the viewer into the viewed, the subject of observation into the object of it, the personality into a name—and back again and so on again.¹⁸ He creates a totally mythic consciousness of personality-name (subject-object), tautological in essence. Shem is a *ba'al shem*; Zvi is of the lineage of Zvi. The name does not signify that personality's place in history but rather in historical tautology, in lineage, in dynasty, in guild. The name signifies the identity of the person to himself, his own self-realization at a time when he himself is the real history. In this sense, the communal history that Agnon writes is mythic, sacred history. That is the purpose of Agnon's community rhetoric with all of its devices and complex games.

2. “REB MOSHE AHARON THE MEAD-SELLER”

The next gabbai Reb Moshe Aharon the Mead-seller is the diametric opposite of Reb Zvi from the dynasty of Zvi: a genuine leader, strong and responsible, perhaps not a Talmudic scholar but sharp and witty. The narrator asks more than once: “Where did Reb Moshe get the strength to act thus?” And he answers: “That is a question without an answer.”¹⁹

Tracking down the mysterious source of his strength is the hidden subject of this story. Reb Moshe Aharon's personality will be spelled out bit by bit—multiple elements, myths, and motifs are blended together in it, frequently without any perceptible relation. Agnon's speech, his intimated thoughts on leadership and power in this story, as in many other stories on

¹⁶ J. Dubois, et al., *A General Rhetoric* (trans. P. B. Burrell and E. M. Slotkin; Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 106–110.

¹⁷ Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa*, p. 128.

¹⁸ On this mechanism of rhetoric, see H. Dubnick, “Bodying Forth the Impossible: Metamorphosis, Mortality and Aesthetics in the Works of Jorge Luis Borges,” *Enculturation* 3.2 (Fall 2001). Online: http://enculturation.gmu.edu/3_2/dubnick/index.html.

¹⁹ Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa*, p. 137.

different topics, take on the shape of a collage. That is why we propose the concept “the rhetoric of collage” in order to describe how the narrator unites varied discourse material in order to establish a paradigmatic character, a psychosocial model, to lead the line of persuasion directed at the community and designed to develop its resistance.

The narrator creates a rhetorical, epideictic work that educates, but without giving it the appearance usually associated with such a work. There is no better way to conceal epideictic rhetoric in motifs, symbols, and excerpts of different narratives than in the rhetoric of collage. This type of rhetoric does not mar the rhetorical ethic, because in fact it conceals nothing: everything is open except for the conclusions and answers of the tough questions that the speaker raises. After all, avoiding answers is too common a ruse in Agnon for us to believe in its sincerity. One must assume that whenever Agnon confesses his inability to provide an answer, he is intimating that the answer should be found by the reader as a result of the narrator’s rhetorical effort, stemming from the persuasive effect, as evident from the new myths created by the text, and as sprouting forth from the new cultural forms that are created in rhetorical acts, and not as a prior doctrine, as dogmas, nor as ready-made ideologies.

Even the name “Moshe Aharon” indicates a proliferation, or at least duplication: two paradigmatic Jewish leaders, Moses and Aaron—in one man. Wisdom and power, morality and justice, study and practice—all are concentrated in one personality. The narrator begins by telling that the gabbai function was only one of many held by Moshe Aharon. Thus the first source of power is the tradition of the fathers, the act of heroism by his grandfather Reb Shaul:

When the Turks marched on the city to wage war and Sobieski came with his army to fight the battle over the city, Reb Shaul went out bravely to the aid of the city, and seized a sword and stood to the right of Reb Yerachmiel who was appointed by the city to protect the Street of the Jews.²⁰

But here heroism and strength involve injury and sickness:

A Turk leaped at them and with his sword, wounded Reb Shaul. Reb Shaul sickened and they added to his name the name ‘Moshe’, which is what they add for a Talmudic scholar who is ill, for Reb Shaul was renowned in his generation as a great scholar.²¹

²⁰ Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa*, p. 134.

²¹ Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa*, p. 134.

A Talmudic scholar holding a sword is not a prevalent image of Jews in the exile. Perhaps for historical credibility or perhaps for the credibility of the image, or perhaps in strict observance of the tradition of biblical heroes for one of whom he was named, valor is connected in dialectical unity with weakness, illness. In order to compensate for the malady and to give him a positive presence, the patient is given the added name of Moshe—the most dialectical hero in the Bible. Every deed, every event in Moshe's life springs from deficiency, or the equivalent, from compensation for want: rescue, nursing, murder, revelation, plagues, exodus, receiving the Torah, breaking the tablets, trial by sword, water from the rock, etc. In all of his deeds, Moshe seems to try to surpass himself, to win some internal battle against himself.

In Jewish heroism, as in every type of true mythological heroism, there is an inherent flaw, a hidden weakness that is invisible until the last minute—an Achilles heel. Why does community memory preserve the weakness along with the heroism? What rhetorical purpose is served in that the tale of valor of Reb Shaul does not obliterate the memory of his wounding? The reason for this is the establishment of the symbol: Reb Shaul takes the sword so that it will fall from his hand and thus create a vacuum, from which will spring, like water from the rock, the new name, the new personality. This is the name he will pass down to his great-grandson and he will also bequeath his valor. From want springs renewal, from failure—invention and breakthrough. For this dialectical model is Agnon's most characteristic rhetorical format, so close to the central, supremely important subject of sacrifice and martyrdom (*kiddush ha-shem*).²²

The new symbol, the new name—Moshe—is a long-term investment in a cultural asset. It is what might function as a rhetorical invention that changes, creates, shapes, that and not the killing of the enemy itself. Culture is not born from violence, but from the rejection of violence, or if we use the concepts of Eric Gans, from an abortive gesture of appropriation that itself becomes a symbol.²³ In our case, it happens discursively in the story of hero-

²² For a discussion of this issue, see, for example, H. Weiss, "Bat ha-melekh ha-digitalit be-yetzirat Agnon" (Digital princess in Agnon's work), in *Ma'aseh Sippur: Studies in Jewish Narrative* (ed. A. Lipsker and R. Kushelevsky; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2006), 1:371–398; M. Arbel, "Ha-mofet shel R. Amnon mi-Magentza" (The example of R. Amnon of Magentza), in *Ma'aseh Sippur: Studies in Jewish Narrative* (ed. A. Lipsker and R. Kushelevsky; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2009), 2:325–359. Y. S. Feldman, *Glory and Agony: Isaac's Sacrifice and National Narrative* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 134.

²³ See any of the books of Eric Gans, in which he elaborates his theory of generative anthropology and originary thinking, for instance, E. Gans, *The Scenic Imagination: Originary Thinking from Hobbes to the Present Day* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 177–179.

ism, so that the narrative did not preserve the memory of Reb Shaul's most successful battles at all, nor is it important if there were any or not. The reason for the selective memory is pre-figuration: a successful battle would not probably have transformed Saul into Moses, and three generations later, another hero would not have been born—Moshe Aharon.

Thus Moshe Aharon's first and second sources of strength and heroism are a pre-figuration (patriarchal tradition) and compensation for want that establishes the symbolic / cultural sign, the rhetorical icon of the evolving figure. The icon is rather archetypical; it is myth, an image event²⁴ full of visual intensity: the sword falling from the hand of the wounded hero. This is the constitutive power of castration, if you will.

Another source of Moshe Aharon's miraculous power is somehow both opposite and parallel to the first source—the power of the gift. He received two gifts, both from the Rabbi of Yazlovitch: one was of books, *Zemach David* and *Nehmad Ve-na'im* by Rabbi Ganz (1541–1613), a renowned Jewish astronomer and geographer; the second—"a handsome goatskin hat which was shiny black and looked as though sparks of blue light were darting out of it."²⁵ The rabbi bought him the hat after Moshe Aharon saved his life:

When they were on the road, an armed robber leaped out in front of them and grabbed hold of the carriage. And he told the rabbi: Get out off the carriage and take off your clothes. Give me your hat and your money. For the rabbi was dressed in fine clothes with an expensive hat on his head worth ten golden dinars and in his bag, he had several pockets filled with golden dinars [for they were on their way to a meeting of the Council of the Four Lands]. Reb Moshe Aharon jumped out of the wagon and grabbed the robber from behind, and thrashed him so soundly that he did not have the strength to get up. Then Reb Moshe Aharon jumped back into the carriage, took the reins from the driver, and drove the carriage into the city where the council was holding its session.²⁶

If we consider, then, the book and the hat—what do they share? In principle, the symbolic significance of clothing for Agnon is well-known, and it is complex and multi-faceted. For example, it might be a mediating object in a master-subject relationship (God-man), as in the story "Ha-malbush" (The

²⁴ On this concept, see J. W. Delicath and K. M. Deluca, "Image Events, the Public Sphere, and Argumentative Practice: The Case of Radical Environmental Groups," *Argumentation* 17 (2003): 315–333; G. Yanoshevsky, "The Possibility and Actuality of Image Events," *Enculturation* 6.2 (2009). Online: <http://enculturation.gmu.edu/6.2/yanoshevsky>.

²⁵ Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa*, p. 135.

²⁶ Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa*, p. 135–136.

garment). A case closer to the story discussed here is the story “Ha-mitpachat” (The kerchief): a headscarf appears as a gift and like every gift, sets into motion a cultural economy of debt-(without)-payment.²⁷ One may see the hat as a libidinal symbol: the giving of the hat signals coronation, the granting of knighthood, an affirmation of physical strength, masculine prowess. The rabbi could have bought Moshe Aharon any other gift at the market, but he chooses to award him a hat of the very kind that he himself wears, as if to say: You saved my honor, and therefore, I am giving you that same honor. It is as though he were receiving him into a special coterie where the usual social barriers fall, where there are no distinctions between rabbis and gabbais, rich and poor; there are only men of honor and valor. A gift of this nature creates a debt which cannot be repaid except by life itself, through forceful and faithful service on behalf of the gifting authority and through the exercise of valor itself.

Thus the gift of the hat is a work of cultural rhetoric, a social-ethical statement establishing an image. This is the rhetoric of ritual that justifies *ex post facto* the use of force and reconstructs for the future an ethical norm but with a retrospective look: Just as Reb Shaul’s grandfather did not hesitate to draw a sword to defend his community, so Moshe Aharon did not hesitate to use force to protect his rabbi. This force stems from the sense of natural justice and from the moral debt-obligation toward the community as authority, when the debt has always existed even when it is realized ritually only after the fact. The conservative cultural rhetoric that Agnon proposes is based on the universal validity of the gift ritual: personal and communal identity protects itself and its spiritual and material resources (the contributions for the Land of Israel that the Rabbi of Yazlovitch was bringing to the council) by crowning itself with the “hat of heroism.” A person or community is always obligated to itself and cannot pay the debt, because the gift it receives is its own identity, its very historical realization / existence.

In light of all this, the meaning of the other, first gift becomes clear—the books *Zemach David* and *Nehmad Ve-na'im* which deal with the history of the Jewish people and of other nations, and geography:

Reb Moshe Aharon learned much from *Zemach David*, and even more he learned from the book after he had read the stories of the grandeur of kings and emperors, and the more he learned about the grandeur of kings and

²⁷ The issue of gift seems to be central to modern philosophical anthropology from *Essai sur le don* (1924) by Marcel Mauss to *Donner la mort* (1993) by Jacques Derrida (M. Mauss, *The Gift* [trans. W. D. Halls; Oxon: Routledge, 2005]; J. Derrida, *The Gift of Death* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995]).

emperors, he would grieve over the pride that had been taken from Israel and given to the nations of the world. How had this come to pass? The whole world has emperors and kings, princes and dignitaries and governors, while we the holy people, the tested and proven children of the Holy One blessed be He, are languishing in exile, and we have neither king nor governor nor regent in our nation.²⁸

If we did not understand the allusion in mentioning the name of David in the book's title, then this paragraph explains at length the meaning of the gift: not only structurally-anthropologically does the gift represent a demand for government and a protected identity but the content matter of the book helps bolster that idea; history shows Moshe Aharon the function of power. It is consolidated in the concept of pride as a synthesis of self-respect, power, independence, self-confidence, as well as physical and spiritual security. The absence of this pride within his community arouses in Moshe Aharon his power of governing. Governance is a type of rhetorical-cultural figure that halts social and discursive entropy: it creates a deviation from degree zero²⁹ in the community discourse in order to allow the community identity to acknowledge itself and to return to its own language by reducing it to degree zero.

Governance is a centripetal force created in this deviation. Through government, like through a complex rhetorical act, the community proposes for itself identities, myths, narratives, and thus proposes tools for choosing between them. But notwithstanding, in a gesture characteristic of rhetoric, it indicates the identity which is preferred. It tries to convince that the choice of this identity will lead to the most successful reduction, to the quickest return to the center. The power of governance is the power of persuasion that negates itself: submission to force cancels out force; the more one advances along the line of centripetal force, the less the force—so that power becomes solidarity. In brief, governance is cultural rhetoric which creates a community hierarchy.

This dynamic is expressed by a religious ruling (*takana*) instituted by Reb Moshe Aharon, the only one mentioned by the narrator:

Reb Moshe Aharon reintroduced the religious ruling of their ancestors that they should not hold a *minyán* [prayer quorum] on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur in the villages but that all of the village residents should come on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur to the synagogue in the city because in the multi-

²⁸ Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa*, p. 134.

²⁹ In the terms of *A General Rhetoric* of Group μ , see footnote 16 above.

tude of people is the king's glory³⁰ and because all year they dwell among the Gentiles and might forget that they are Jews. If you only knew how wretched are those village dwellers. Most of them are ignorant people whose wives do not even know how to recite the blessing over the Sabbath candles. He did not even allow anyone to hold a *minyān* in his house.³¹

In summary, Moshe Aharon himself is Zemach David (the offspring of David, i.e., the King and Messiah). It is very likely that the metonymic analogy between the gabbai and the name of the book that he received as a gift is the purpose of this entire convoluted narrative with its internal stories—stories within stories. Accepting a gift is accepting responsibility, crowning, obligation—and hence creating social roles and building a hierarchy. It follows that Rabbi of Yazlovitch's giving the gift was an act of cultural rhetoric that constitutes identity and establishes governance.

The story of Reb Moshe Aharon is characterized from the outset by several humoristic details, yet it ends with a thoroughly grotesque event. We would not have to discuss it were it not the distorted reflection of the very same rhetorical-cultural device that we examined in the body of the story. The concluding paragraph presents a world turned on its head, the world of absurd which is parallel to Reb Moshe Aharon's world, for the latter is not its hero but rather the hidden witness:

Three things happened in Reb Moshe Aharon's time. The wealthy man in the city made a party to celebrate the marriage of his wife's daughter. Many prominent and distinguished dignitaries came to that party. Each one brought his gift. Among them, they brought a monkey and a dwarf.... And what was the third event that I referred to? That same day a black man (*kushi*) was seen in the city. People came out of their houses to see him, in order to recite *baruch meshane ha-briiot* [the blessing over seeing an unusual-looking person]. In the end it turned out that he was not a black man but a dignitary who was the son of a dignitary who had blackened his face and hands with black dye in order to make fun of the people who came to see him. In the end, the joke was only on him. The dye he had used on his face and hands clung to his skin and would not wash off with all of the water in the world, and he became the laughingstock of all who saw him.³²

This pseudo-historical, satirical, quasi-journalistic text portrays an acerbic if fragmentary parody of the idea of governance which had previ-

³⁰ Proverbs 14:28. Here we find the rhetoric of royalty, that is, of governance. The function of "royalty" is rhetorical-communal—the consolidation of the communal identity.

³¹ Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa*, p. 147.

³² Sh. Y. Agnon, *Ir U-meloa*, p. 148.

ously been so extravagantly extolled. No wonder; comic discourse has always been a welcome and essential addition to the discourse of power. The text deteriorates and defames, in a way that is not entirely “politically correct,” that same world of the government of the world nations that had earlier aroused the envy of Reb Moshe Aharon. “Prominent and respected dignitaries,” supposedly similar to Rabbi of Yazlovitch, give gifts to one another but not books and not even hats but instead monkeys and dwarfs. Not only their gifts but they themselves change shape, lose their identity. Black man, dwarf, and monkey—these are types of “the other” which signify, at least to the Jews who come to recite a blessing over them, the diminution of the human element.³³

The sublime ritual of the exchanging of gifts is deteriorated to the level of caricature, albeit still quite symbolic. The rhetorical nature of this ritual may be more obvious here than ever, because the deviation from degree zero of the social discourse is greater, but the rhetoric here is serving only the base instincts of the “prominent and distinguished dignitaries.” The incident of the spurious black man, one might say, is the paradigm in the section. The dialectical model of the metabole, perhaps even metaphor, is completely clear: white becomes black (a deviation) and reverts to being white in essence (reduction) and black in appearance (metaphor). However, this is only a caricature of rhetoric, for the whole purpose of this carnival “rhetor” is “to make fun of the people,” and this was not even accomplished because in the end, “the joke was only on him.”

However, in this caricature, as in every caricature, there is a strong kernel of truth. No, it is not that this time Agnon is contradicting himself nor is he refuting his own argument; he is bolstering it by the use of negation. He shows what can be expected for a community that denies its own identity, tradition, continuity. Agnon’s black dignitary is not only the ridiculous court jester. He is a symptom of the degeneration of governance, of the collapsed continuity of generations, of the destruction of history. The blackening of skin is perceived in rabbinical thought as the punishment (in place of castration) which Ham (the forefather of the African nations) received for trans-

³³ This is based on the view of the sages: “If one sees a negro, a very red or very white person, a hunchback, a dwarf or a dropsical person, he says: Blessed be He who makes strange creatures. If he sees one with an amputated limb, or blind, or flat-headed, or lame, or smitten with boils, or pock-marked, he says: Blessed be the true Judge!... On seeing an elephant, an ape, or a long-tailed ape, one says: Blessed is He who makes strange creatures” (*b. Ber. 58b*). For an extensive discussion, see A. Melamed, *Ha-yahafokh kushi oro?* ([Can the Ethiopian change his skin?]) The image of the Black in Jewish culture: A history of the other; Haifa: Haifa University, 2002), pp. 75–90 (English translation: A. Melamed, *The Image of the Black in Jewish Culture: A History of the Other* [London: Routledge Curzon, 2003]).

gressing the divine prohibition against having sexual relations in the ark built by Noah; he denied his Creator, the source of a legitimate fertility, and lost his might.³⁴ This “dignitary son of a dignitary” makes fun not only of those who see him but also, and perhaps principally, of his forefathers, the source of his authority and legality. The mask of the “other” which he puts on sticks fast to his face. It is impossible to tell whether hiding under the mask of the black jester is a racist tyrant or a champion of human rights. But in the meanwhile, the continuum of tradition and governance, the foundations of culture, has already been undermined. The story, like many in *Ir U-meloah*, presents portents of the coming Holocaust.³⁵ The Jews of Agnon’s Buchach, which exists no longer, do not hear the prophecy; they can still laugh, for the time being.

³⁴ “Our Rabbis taught: Three copulated in the ark, and they were all punished—the dog, the raven, and Ham. The dog was doomed to be tied, the raven expectorates, and Ham was smitten in his skin” (*b. Sanh.* 108b).

³⁵ Hillel Weiss claims that the book as whole is directed at the subject of the Holocaust (H. Weiss, “Sipurei ha-khazanim le-Agnon” [Agnon’s tales of cantors], *Amudim* 614 [1998]: 21–22), or as Alan Mintz writes, everything is aimed at the establishment of an “apocalyptic mode replete with visions of destruction” (A. Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1984], p. 9).