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A PORTRAIT OF TWO ARTISTS AT THE CROSSROADS: BETWEEN RAV KOOK AND S.Y. AGNON

Rav Avraham Yitzhak ha-Kohen Kook (1865-1935) and Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1887-1970) were figures of enormous and entwined significance, encountering one another in the heady years of the Second Aliyah (the decade of immigration to Ottoman Palestine prior to World War I). This personal relationship was to span decades and permeate to an underappreciated extent the literary production of Agnon. In this essay, I aim to show that R. Kook had a profound impact on the young Shmuel Yosef, and that the latter, for his part, embodied R. Kook's ambitions for the type of authentically Jewish creative endeavor he hoped would be generated as part of the national return to Erets Yisrael.

Agnon, the central figure of modern Hebrew literature, and the language's only Nobel laureate, was, upon arrival in Jaffa in 1908, the product of a traditional Galician upbringing. He had been recognized as a prodigy in the beit midrash and for his burgeoning talents as an author (first in Yiddish, but upon departing Europe exclusively in Hebrew). His wholly Orthodox upbringing was of the type—perhaps more typical of life in the Austro-Hungarian Empire than elsewhere in the Jewish world—which encouraged his literary interests. After a few years of traditional *heder* study, he was considered too advanced and was released to learn independently with his father, a rabbi and scholar who made his living as a fur merchant. A happy and comfortable family life was provided by his hasidic father and mitnagdic mother (such a “mixed marriage” only became conceivable in the late nineteenth century), and the dynamic of this rich Jewish

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milieu—together with the world he encountered in the Land of Israel—served him for decades as raw material for his craft.

Upon leaving his father's home at the age of twenty, with his ambition outpaced only by his talent, Agnon arrived in Jaffa having abandoned traditional observance, like so many other young men of the period. While he returned to a completely Orthodox lifestyle by 1924, during his non-observant period (precisely when he first encountered R. Kook) he was nevertheless engaged in literary production of profound religious moment, drawing on his mastery of the "Jewish bookshelf." This sense of occupying different worlds was reflected in a comment by Gershom Scholem, one that might easily have been made about R. Kook himself. He described Agnon as Janus-like, looking back at the world that was and looking forward toward the world that is and will be; back at Europe and forward to the revival of Jewish life in Erets Yisrael. "Since you do not accept the continuity of tradition and its language in their true context," Scholem imagined Agnon saying to his readers, "take them in the transformation which they have undergone in my work, take them from someone who stands at the crossroads and can see in both directions."¹

For his part, R. Kook was a major transitional figure in Jewish thought and life in the Land of Israel. His was the time of tension between the Old Yishuv of Jerusalem, with its old-world, religious ethos, and that of Jaffa, the new, modern, and distinctly secular. A kind of conduit between the two, R. Kook looked favorably on the pioneering work of secular Jews, who were vilified by the rabbinic establishment in Jerusalem. Thus, alongside his staunch commitment to Jewish ritual observance, R. Kook evidenced a deep theological flexibility that allowed him to perceive the secular builders of Jewish civil life and society as performing God's work in the Holy Land.

Indeed, R. Kook diverged from his traditional rabbinical colleagues on a wide range of issues. All fields of creative human endeavor, science and academics, art and literature—each of them with their own caveats—were considered by him to be elements of Jewish cultural renaissance and fostering of national identity. These were longstanding interests of R. Kook, going back at least as far as the 1888 opening essay of his short-lived journal *Ittur Soferim*, in which he described the art of writing and its potential to repair the fissures of Jewish society. Famously, he was present and delivered a lengthy oration at the dedication of The Hebrew University in 1925. Despite his ambivalence regarding a variety of things

¹ Gershom Scholem, "S.Y. Agnon—The Last Hebrew Classic?," in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, ed. Werner Dannhauser (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 96.

connected with the nascent institution, he viewed the university as a mark of Jewish national revival. Among other things, such an institution would enable Jews to conduct academic affairs in Hebrew, a language in the process of both construction and expansion. In this too R. Kook was clearly in the vanguard: a common academic view had it that German would be the natural language of instruction in the fledgling university under Jewish auspices in Palestine. Yet R. Kook thought of expanding the Hebrew lexicon as a natural feature of the Jewish people returning to its own land in its own language. This broadmindedness even extended to a positive attitude towards the Bezalel Art Academy, despite the fact that artistic production often skirts close to or even oversteps halakhic boundaries.²

In a certain period, the two figures, R. Kook and Agnon, had parallel life trajectories. From 1908 to 1912 they overlapped in Jaffa. At that point Agnon left for Germany for what was meant to be a sojourn to expand his horizons, but the outbreak of World War I made travel impossible. A wedding and two children followed, with Agnon finally returning to Mandate Palestine only in 1924. R. Kook too spent the war years abroad; caught in Europe, he lived first in Switzerland and then in London. Agnon moved to Jerusalem upon his return in 1924, where R. Kook had been appointed the city's chief rabbi, and soon after chief rabbi of Palestine. There Agnon occasionally attended classes taught by R. Kook, renewing the close personal contact from their Jaffa period. Nearly thirty years after R. Kook's death, Agnon wrote, "I was a student [*talmid*] of R. Kook *zt"l*, perhaps I am the last of those who know him closely."³

In 1967, then a Nobel laureate, Agnon related that decades earlier R. Kook had presented him with a copy of the first volume of his *Iggerot ha-Ra'ayah*, his collected letters first published in 1923, on a visit R. Kook made to the author's home. (In the current edition we find a letter that R. Kook wrote to "Mr. Czaczkes," as Agnon was known before he

² On these matters, and anything having to do with R. Kook's intellectual biography, the reader in English will find no better reference than Yehudah Mirsky, *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); on R. Kook's dialogue with culture, see Yehudah Mirsky, "From Every Heresy, Faith and Holiness from Every Defiled Thing: Toward Rav Kook's Theology of Culture," in *Developing a Jewish Perspective on Culture*, ed. Y. Sarna (Jersey City: Yeshiva University Press/Ktav, 2013), 103-142. For the philosophical background to R. Kook's attitude to general culture see David Shatz, "The Integration of Torah and Culture: Its Scope and Limits in the Thought of Rav Kook," in *Jewish Thought in Dialogue* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 92-117.

³ Letter of June 6, 1964 to Moshe Ungerfeld, printed in Haim Be'er, *Gam Abavatam Gam Sinatam* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1992), 309.

took his pen name.⁴) The title page bears a dedication to Agnon in R. Kook's handwriting, departing from his customary inscription of "*Birkat ha-Kohen*" ("With the blessing of the Kohen"), he chose another phrase: "*be-Hibbat ha-Oman*"—"With an artist's affection."⁵ For R. Kook, both of them, the rabbi and the author, were engaged in artistic production. In fact, atypically in the rabbinic world, R. Kook himself wrote poetry. Agnon, for his part, referred to himself as a *sofer*, a richly allusive term that recalls both author and ritual scribe. Indeed, we glimpse in Agnon's work his play with the notion of the act of composing modern literature being holy or even ritualistic.

From 1908 until 1912, when he departed for Germany, Agnon's literary production expanded, and so did his fame. His first major work, a story serialized in the newspaper and then published in book format, was the novella *Ve-Haya be-Akov le-Mishor*.⁶ In a lengthy memoiristic piece about his relationship with R. Kook, Agnon recalls: "Our great teacher, Avraham Yitzhak ha-Kohen Kook, may he be remembered for a blessing—how close he drew me in! In his humility he was kind enough to read my story *Ve-Haya be-Akov le-Mishor*, which was then still in manuscript. When he returned it to me he said in these exact words, 'This is an authentic Hebrew/Jewish story, flowing through the divine channels with no barrier.'"⁷ This emphasis on authenticity provides a clue as to the

⁴ R. Kook's letter to Agnon appears in *Iggerot ha-Ra'ayah* I, #299, 338. Penned in May 1910, R. Kook answers questions posed by the young author, the first regarding the parchment for Torah scrolls. I suspect that Agnon's query may have been a piece of research generated by the composition of his story "*Agadat ha-Sofer*" in his volume *Elu ve-Elu*, and in English as "The Tale of the Scribe," in *A Book That Was Lost*, ed. Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb-Hoffman (New Milford, CT: The Toby Press, 2008). Agnon had been at work on this story throughout the decade overlapping with the Jaffa period. Agnon's letter, to which R. Kook was responding, appears in facsimile in Simcha Raz, *Malakhim ke-Venei Adam* (Jerusalem: Kol Mevasser, 1993), 364.

⁵ S.Y. Agnon, *Me-Atsmi el Atsmi* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishing House, 1999), 102. The book gifted to Agnon is still in the collection of the Agnon House, but has been vandalized and the original title page and inscription removed. Confirmation of Agnon's claim can be seen in the annotation by R. Zvi Yehuda Kook on Agnon's note of thanks to R. Kook; facsimile in Simcha Raz, *Malakhim ke-Venei Adam*, 367.

⁶ Subsequently anthologized in the volume *Elu ve-Elu*; forthcoming in translation as *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* (New Milford, CT: The Toby Press, 2017).

⁷ S.Y. Agnon, *Me-Atsmi el Atsmi*, 201. Those who cynically question the authenticity of this quote (which is, after all, very flattering hearsay brought by Agnon in the name of the late R. Kook long after he was claimed to have spoken it), overlook the fact that it was similarly reported by Rabbi E.M. Lifshitz already in 1926, in the journal *Ha-Shiloah* 45:3-4 (Jerusalem, 1926), and reprinted in his *Ketavim*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1949), 212.

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enthusiasm R. Kook felt for young Agnon's achievement as a Hebrew author. As noted above, for R. Kook a literature of the Jewish people was pivotal to a Jewish renaissance. R. Kook reads Agnon as spearheading an historic turn, not merely as translating literature from another language into Hebrew. This turn he identifies as the real cultural product we long for.

R. Kook took early notice of Agnon. While the two men were still in Jaffa, R. Kook asked to read his work. At the point of this encounter (some time before 1912), Agnon's portfolio was relatively modest, and everything he had published could be read in several days. Yet Agnon hesitated. Perhaps this ambivalence revolved around stories such as *Ve-Haya be-Akov le-Mishor*, for reasons which will become apparent below. Such reluctance on the author's part was met head-on by the Chief Rabbi:

R. Kook *zt"l* asked to receive copies of my writings. I told him that I had already considered giving him one or two. He said, "But I wanted all of them, and you think of giving me only some of them?" I replied, Your wish is my honor.... Some time later I saw him and he told me that he had read my work. I asked, All of it? He replied, "All of it, and I will tell you something: The Pri Megadim... explains that if a one quantity of forbidden food should fall into a volume of permitted food, sixtyfold times as large, the forbidden becomes *batel*, and the permitted 'profits' from the prohibited, since there are now sixty-one parts. That's the way it is with you, even if there is something 'forbidden' that has fallen into your books, it is *batel be-shishim*, cancelled out, and has become permitted."⁸

We imagine R. Kook telling him, "Mr. Czaczkes, your stories are not *The Guide of the Perplexed* or *Mesillat Yesharim*. They are modern literature, which after all is marked by elements of eros and passion and even adultery" (although this is likely what suppressed the completion of the novel *Shira* for decades). After all, in literature, unlike in life, character flaws are precisely that which instruct and entertain. *Tsaddikim* and flawless role models rarely make for very interesting characters in novels. All of Agnon's great characters are held between crime and consequence, sin and guilt, action and responsibility, and always, tradition and modernity. He is engaged in a kind of desperate attempt to document a lost world of tradition, the innocence of Reb Yudel Hasid, the righteousness of Tehilla, the "old bet midrash" in Buczacz of "three or four generations ago," or even

⁸ S.Y. Agnon, *Me-Atsmi el Atsmi*, 93.

the fervor of secular Zionist ideologues: our “brethren in Merhavva” in *Only Yesterday*—all lost or destroyed from without or from within. By conveying that world to us he forces contemporary readers to confront the essential questions of religion in the modern world, a world marked by a dominant culture which is not religious, but secular in its very nature. That cultural reality, however, colors much of modern literature, including of course, modern Hebrew literature, and the reason for this is a diminution in the sense of *ol malkhut Shamayim*—God’s immanence. However, this is decidedly not the case in Agnon’s writing. Even when characters sin, steal, lust, or fail tragically, it is precisely within the context of *malkhut Shamayim*. In this way Agnon is neither a shill for tradition nor attempting to undermine it. The proclivity of an author to idealize or alternatively satirize a worldview does not in and of itself indicate his stance vis-à-vis that worldview. In the case of Agnon, it’s neither one nor the other, but a desire to simultaneously skewer *and* sacralize, and in so doing ask what the past has to say to the present and future. This makes him both the most modern of Orthodox writers, as well as the most Orthodox of modern writers.

Consider *Ve-Haya he-Akov le-Mishor*, the very story that Agnon was likely hesitant to hand over to R. Kook. The protagonist, Menashe Chaim ha-Kohen and his wife, Kreindel Charne, are childless, struggling shopkeepers in the Galician town of Buczacz (the author’s own hometown, in today’s western Ukraine). A competitor drives them out of business and into poverty, and Menashe Chaim is reduced to becoming an itinerant *schmorrer*. Armed with a Rebbe’s recommendation letter, attesting to his upright character and downtrodden state, Menashe Chaim sets off to beg for capital to reestablish himself. Having collected enough to make the return journey to wife and home, he chances upon one of the region’s ubiquitous fairs, where he encounters another poor Jew who has not been doing quite as well. Menashe Chaim sells this person his recommendation letter, a kind of pre-Internet identity fraud, with which the pauper might similarly succeed in his begging. When he turns up dead, just one of myriad anonymous beggars, and his pockets are checked for identification, the letter is found attesting that this is Menashe Chaim. Word gets back to Buczacz that poor Menashe Chaim has died, and with much deliberation the town rabbi allows Kreindel Charne to remarry.

Thus we have a case of real *aguna*, but one in which the rabbi erred based upon the evidence which led him to a false conclusion. This generated an interesting revision between the first and second editions of the story. After its initial publication, learned Jews criticized the story not from a literary perspective but from a halakhic one (much to Agnon’s

consternation), claiming that as a plot element it was implausible that the rabbi would have made this mistake. In response to his critics, Agnon added a paragraph to the second edition of the story which is basically a list of the Talmudic and Rabbinic sources on which the rabbi would have relied to render his (erroneous) *pesak halakha*, but bolstering the plausibility that the facts in the story could have led a *talmid hakham* to such a tragically mistaken conclusion, releasing this widow from being an *aguna*, allowing the “chained woman” to remarry. In this we see Agnon’s commitment to the idea that the story had to be authentic within the halakhic tradition that it was representing.⁹

Returning to the story, long after, when Menashe Chaim finally returns to town, it is the day of the *berit mila* for the newly born son of Kreindel Charne. He understands, then, that it was on his account that they had been childless. He also realizes that if he reveals himself, he will simultaneously be revealing the child’s status as a *mamzer* and cause his wife to be divorced from both the person that she believes to be her current husband and he himself. And here the reader understands the full symbolic weight of the protagonist’s name: Menashe Chaim. “Menashe” means to forget (cf. Gen. 41:51); Menashe Chaim is forgotten while still alive. He’s alive and walking the earth, but everyone believes him to be dead, and thus in a sense forgotten to the world. Menashe the forgotten makes a decision: he will not destroy the life of his wife and her little baby. He goes off to the cemetery in the town of the fair where his “doppelganger” has been buried, where he doesn’t commit suicide, but rather withers away. Though it is forbidden for a kohen to enter a cemetery, as far as Menashe Chaim is concerned, he’s already dead. In fact, he thinks that it would be better if he really were dead.

Kreindel Charne, the bereaved widow/wife has lived with a lingering sense of guilt about Menashe Chaim’s unmarked death. Now financially able to do so, she decides to erect a stone over her first husband’s grave. Perhaps, the reader might presume, this is the title’s reference to “straightening of the crooked,” the righting of a wrong: Menashe Chaim will at

⁹ On the revisions and sources see Yehuda Friedlander, “*Shki’iey Halakha ve-Tafkidam be-Tashtit ha-Sippur ‘Ve-Haya he-Akov le-Mishor’ me-et S.Y. Agnon*” in *Al Ve-Haya he-Akov le-Mishor—Masot le-Novella le-S.Y. Agnon*, ed. Y. Friedlander (Ramat Gan; Bar-Ilan University Press, 1993), 211-219. On the halakhic issues at play in the story see Yitzhak Bart, “*Ba Harug be-Raglav*,” in Yeshivat Har Etzion’s *Daf Kesher* #960 (3 Iyar 5764), available at etzion.org.il. On the actual background to the critique, by a Hungarian rabbi who may have not fully understood that he was reading a work of fiction, see David Cnaani, *S.Y. Agnon Ba’al Peh* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuhad, 1971), 46.

least not lie in a forgotten, unmarked grave. Except, even this good act should not actually succeed, for Kreindel Charne will erect the marker over the grave of the beggar who purchased the letter, who was mistaken for Menashe Chaim, setting the catastrophic series of events into motion. When Menashe Chaim sees the grave digger (who is also the stone cutter) engraving his own name upon a gravestone, he is shattered, and confesses the whole story to the man. When Menashe Chaim does die in the cemetery, the grave digger buries him, and switches the marker setting the stone paid for by Kreindel Charne above the actual grave, and in doing so, straightens the crooked, repairing that which was broken—Menashe Chaim is not forever forgotten, and at least merits a *shem u-she'erit*, a name and a remainder in Israel.

Ve-Haya he-Akov le-Mishor is a work of great literary merit, and was essential in launching Agnon's career. Its complexity is evident when one considers that it is a wholly modern piece of literature held within the classical framework of a hasidic tale. This enabled a devout atheist like Yosef Haim Brenner—the first to truly appreciate Agnon's genius, paying for the volume's publication from his own shallow pocket—to recognize it as the “first work of secular Hebrew literature in which tradition [itself] had become the medium of pure art.” Simultaneously, the volume's type-setter, a devout Breslover, read it as the “true embodiment of hasidic lore and spirit.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, with all its literary value, *Ve-Haya he-Akov le-Mishor* is problematic on many levels. That the other “crooked” plot cannot be straightened is acknowledged by Agnon in a later work, his 1920 political satire “Young and Old Together,” which features among a large cast of characters a Mr. Hofmann, the grandson of the *mamzer* child born to Kreindel Charne—thus rendering himself similarly tainted with the halakhic dilemma.¹¹ Agnon leaves it to his readers to connect the dots and realize that these stories all occupy the same universe, but when he considers Hoffman's family tree the attentive reader will immediately recall the words of the Mishna: “What is the crooked thing that cannot be fixed? One who had relations with a forbidden woman and fathers a *mamzer* through her” (*Hagiga* 1:7). The consequences of this tragedy are reverberating through the history of this little Jewish town, unbeknownst to all except Agnon's omniscient narrator and his readers, yet this is precisely the tale that R. Kook designated as “an authentic Jewish story.” This designation had nothing to do with the novella being a piece

¹⁰ See Gershom Scholem, “S.Y. Agnon—The Last Hebrew Classic?,” 99.

¹¹ “Young and Old Together” in *The Orange Peel and Other Satires*, ed. J. Saks (New Milford, CT: The Toby Press, 2015).

of halakhic literature, a kind of literary *Shulhan Arukh*. What prompted R. Kook, then, to identify *Ve-Haya he-Akov le-Mishor* as artistically significant from a Jewish point of view? The answer to this question lies in the nexus of R. Kook's own identity: rabbi, scholar, communal leader, philosopher, poet, and author. R. Kook was considering the purpose of literature when he praised *Ve-Haya he-Akov le-Mishor*. He did so because it depicts a true Jewish tragedy, a tragedy which emerges as the unintended outcome of the halakhic system itself. This is a tragedy which could have occurred and, indeed, probably did occur.

But what did R. Kook envision literature's place within revived Jewish life in modern Erets Yisrael to be? In 1906, R. Kook wrote an important essay entitled "*Ha-Dor*" ("The Present Generation"; oddly, still untranslated). Penned in highly romanticized Hebrew, we witness stylistic similarities between R. Kook and Agnon, as the young author also composed his earliest stories written in Jaffa in a similar register, a highly ornate Hebrew, which Agnon tempered as he found his own voice.¹² In this essay, written two years into R. Kook's time in Palestine and two years prior to Agnon's arrival, the current generation is assessed. R. Kook looked at the way secularism had overtaken the Jewish people and attempted to offer a diagnosis, if not a remedy as well. In this effort, he articulated an idea that has significant theological ramifications, one to which he returned repeatedly over the next thirty years. R. Kook proposed that the young secularists were not rebels. Rather, they were seekers whose searching led them to different ideologies. Europe at the time of the Second Aliyah was replete with "isms": nationalism, communism, socialism, and Bundism, and more. Jews were either at the forefront of the great intellectual movements of turn-of-the-century Europe or strongly attracted to them. In R. Kook's reckoning, the search for something that they did not locate within their own tradition led them astray. Yet that search for

¹² Although, in Scholem's assessment, Agnon's admiration for R. Kook was specifically not for his artistic merits as a poet or writer, which Agnon may have felt were lacking, but as a giant of the spirit, the "magic of his pure soul"; Gershom Scholem, *Devarim Bego* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1975), 465. In a 1925 letter to his patron Schocken, Agnon's critique of R. Kook's early style is implicit in his comment that "Rav Kook has evolved lately, his sermons now have a beginning, middle, and end, which had not previously been the case, when he would wander from topic to topic, never returning to the point from which he began." See: *S.Y. Agnon-S.Z. Schocken: Hilufey Iggerot* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishing House, 2003), #176, 174. However, there is no indication that Agnon's critique on R. Kook went beyond matters of style. This is in sharp contrast to R. Kook's fraught interactions with the other great literary figure of the Jaffa period, Yosef Haim Brenner (for more on this see Mirsky, *Rav Kook*, 67-69, 88-91).

meaning is itself a positive motion. Indeed, he identified the revolt against tradition on the part of the young idealists—many of who made a powerful impression on him—as none other than the pre-messianic impudence (*chutzpa*) foreseen by the Mishna *Sota* (9:15). R. Kook suggested that one of the problems rests with literature. (Precisely which writers and novels he was thinking of is unclear, but as he had been living in the Russian Empire, and the bulk of Second Aliyah youth were Russian Jews, it is likely he was referring to the great Russian novelists.) In all cases, literature, for R. Kook, was viewed as a force of tremendous imaginative power. The young seekers read it, and it generated ideas. Thus, their movement ought to be considered not so much a *running away from*, but rather a *running toward*, their rebellion, itself an indication of their “thirst for ideas, and reason, and with it for richer, more saturated emotion—vibrant and alive.”¹³

In *Orot ha-Tehiyya* R. Kook predicts (or prays) that, “Literature will be sanctified; the writers too will become holy. The world will be elevated to realize the great and subtle power of literature—the uplifting of the spiritual foundation of the world with all its excellence. The light will continue to break forth, justice will demand its due. Those demanding are many thirsty souls, feeling souls, able to discern... the expressions and the style, the impurity of thought of many writers, which no flowery moralizing can cover up.”¹⁴ In a highly evocative line in *Orot ha-Teshuva*, R. Kook’s great work on repentance, we read his view that contemporary literature reflects a world that is increasingly debased. R. Kook’s solution, which feels quite ahead of its time, was that to repair the literature of the current day, to transform it into a positive, imaginative force, the authors must first repair themselves:

The realization that a decline in the moral state impedes the flowering of literature is a feeling unique to the Jewish people. Only we realize in truth that in order to improve the quality of literature, there is a necessary prerequisite, that the writers first cleanse their souls. We feel in ourselves the great need for penitence so that we might rise to the sublime heights of the noble literature that is uniquely ours, that stems from the wisdom of Israel, whose source is holiness and purity, faith and spiritual heroism.¹⁵

¹³ “*Ma’amar ha-Dor*” in *Eder ha-Yakar ve-Ikvei ha-Tson*, 107-116.

¹⁴ *Orot ha-Tehiyya* #36-37, in *Orot*, 81-82; translated by B. Naor in *Orot* (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2015), 359-361 (bilingual edition).

¹⁵ *Orot ha-Teshuva* 15:12; translation by B. Bokser in *Abraham Isaac Kook* (Mahwah, NJ: The Paulist Press, 1978), 118.

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As Mirsky aptly puts it, for R. Kook, when it comes to the arts and creative expression, “traditional Judaism’s relationship to the rebellions of modernity was not to be strictly antagonistic, but dialectic.”¹⁶ Clearly R. Kook did not embrace all forms of literary expression, and presumably elements of Agnon’s writing were viewed by R. Kook with a jaundiced eye. Specifically the Agnonian mastery of irony, which pervades almost all of his writing, may even have been what R. Kook had in mind in an essay penned the year the two men met. In “*Derekh ha-Tehiyya*” he critiques much of contemporary Hebrew literature for its lack of grounding in classical Jewish sources—a critique not aimed at Agnon, who R. Kook specifically praised as a counter example. Yet he may have been thinking of Agnon when he described the limits of “humor, satire, [literary and cultural] criticism, drama, art, and philosophy,” saying that “even if they exhaust all their sharp arrows” in skewering contemporary society, that mode of creativity is limited in its ability to effect positive change.¹⁷ Nonetheless, by absorbing and purifying the best elements of general culture Judaism would widen the angle of religious vision and experience and win over the youth.

Reflecting on R. Kook and the whole period of the Second Aliyah, Agnon singled him out as one of the pioneers designing the contours of Jewish life. His contribution was to imbue the time and the people with “the Torah of the Land of Israel, the notion that working the land is itself sacred and holy work.”¹⁸

Agnon telegraphed this idea in various ways. Notably, R. Kook never features directly as a character in his stories, though he depicts all of the other great personalities of Jaffa. Agnon’s novels are not historical fiction in the strict sense of the term. But these novels are set in real historical times and places, and one encounters historical figures on the streets of the stories (in Avraham Holtz’s term, it is a genre more accurately called “documentary fiction”). In *Only Yesterday*, one character is giving directions to another, “When you get there, you see some houses... the house of Rabbi Kook on the left. You walk between heaps of sand until you come to the new school for girls,”¹⁹ and so on. Unlike Brenner, Ruppin,

¹⁶ Mirsky, *Rav Kook*, 39, 58.

¹⁷ “*Derekh ha-Tehiyya*” (originally published in Rav Kook’s journal *Ha-Nir*, 1909) in *Ma’amarei ha-Ra’ayah* (Jerusalem: Keren Golda Katz, 1984), 1-9; quote at 3.

¹⁸ S.Y. Agnon, *MeAtsmi el Atsmi*, 152-153.

¹⁹ S.Y. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, trans. B. Harshav (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 433. The novel contains two other passing references to the unnamed “Rabbi of Jaffa,” including: “they praised him [the Rabbi of Jaffa], for aside from his great expertise in overt and mysterious knowledge, he truly sacrifices

Gnessin, and the other historical figures, R. Kook is not placed as a character within the story. His house in Jaffa serves as a place marker, as if to signal that R. Kook inhabits this particular literary universe, yet “his face is not shown.”

What stopped Agnon from depicting R. Kook more clearly on the page than he did? Though it is far from the consensual view, I believe that Agnon feared desecrating, as it were, this revered mentor by turning him into a literary character.²⁰ Nonetheless, Agnon does craft characters that are meant to stand in for R. Kook, or aspects of his personality, who serve as a mouthpiece for his point of view. Take, for instance, the *Only Yesterday* character Rabbi Menahem “ha-Omed”: Menahem “the ever-standing.” Like R. Kook, Menahem embodies *torat Erets Yisrael* and the sanctity of working the holy soil. This character literally stands with a pitchfork in one hand and a volume of Talmud in the other. The message is that these two ideals, these two endeavors, can be conjoined. “I will tell you,” Menahem says, but his words could easily have been lifted directly from the pages of R. Kook’s writings, “every Jew must try with all his might to dwell in the Land of Israel, for the origin of the nation of Israel [*Ha-Uma ha-Yisraelit*] is in the Land of Israel. And since the Land is destroyed and desolate and it is hard to dwell in a place of destruction, we must repair the place [*le-taken et ha-makom*] and make it a place of settlement.”²¹

Menahem ha-Omed is only one of a string of characters in a long novel of people pulled between different worlds. Among these figures, however, it is Menahem ha-Omed, who stands out as one of the very few

himself for every single son of Israel,” 510, but see continuation there regarding the controversies around this Rabbi, which align with R. Kook’s experiences (see also reference at 514).

²⁰ Prof. David Tamar, a confidant of Agnon, reported: “I asked him a few times why Rav [Kook’s] life wasn’t used as ‘clay in the hands of the potter’ [i.e., as raw material for Agnon’s stories]: From his evasive responses I understood that he feared approaching Rav Kook’s awesome character, lest he should fail at the task in his writing”; David Tamar, “*Ha-Sofer ve-haRav*,” *Ha’aretz* (March 1, 1985), 18.

²¹ S.Y. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 179; cf. *Orot*, 9, translated by B. Naor in *Orot* (Maggid Books), 115: “The Land of Israel is not something external, not an external national asset, a means to an end of collective solidarity and the strengthening of the nation’s existence, physical or even spiritual. The Land of Israel is an essential unit bound by the bond-of-life with the Nation, united by inner characteristics with its existence,” etc., and through first 8 sections of *Orot*. While R. Kook did not coin the phrase “*Uma Yisraelit*,” or the generic “*uma*,” meaning the Israeli/Jewish Nation, he was likely the modern writer who marshaled the terms to his use the most, in his focus on the greater common collective of the Jewish people. (There are more than 5,300 appearances of the terms in R. Kook’s writings.) The resonance of the phrase in Menahem’s speech with this passage in *Orot* should be clear.

to achieve balance, the often sought and rarely found value of *middat ha-hishtavut*—the serenity that comes from equanimity. Menahem is contrasted with *Only Yesterday*'s tragic anti-hero, Isaac Kummer, who spends the long novel trapped between secular Jaffa and pious Jerusalem, on a horizontal plane, but also between the imperfect realities of terrestrial Jerusalem (“*shel matta*”) and celestial Jerusalem (“*shel ma’ala*”), on the vertical plane.²² Unable to achieve the aspired-for equanimity, Isaac meets a tragic end, bound to a bed (reminiscent of his biblically bound eponym), ravaged by the rabid bite of the demonic dog Balak.²³ Late in the novel, in a highly symbolic dream which comes immediately after Isaac’s final encounter with Menahem, Isaac sees himself, “in the street barefoot without shoes, his head bare. He heard the sound of prayer and followed the sound. He came to a two-story house, the bottom story in ruins and you climbed a ladder to the top story where they were praying. And the ladder stood straight. He leaned the ladder and ascended. When he put his head in, the door closed on him from inside and his body was outside.”²⁴ Literary critic Dan Miron interprets the dream, quite plausibly, as a symbol for the “tragic vision” of *Only Yesterday* (and, I would add, the tragedy of so many young people of the Second Aliyah): the unsuccessful attempt to combine the thesis and antithesis of Judaism: traditional observance and Zionism.²⁵ Perhaps Agnon had this in mind by juxtaposing Isaac’s dream with his final encounter with Menahem: that the tragedy emanates from ignoring the “third harmonizing verse,” the potential synthesis, which

²² These two planes of the novel have been explored, most recently, by Heddy Shait in her *Lifanekha Derakhayim* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2015), chapter 3. Of course other polarities are present throughout *Only Yesterday*: The Diaspora vs. Land of Israel, wholeness vs. fragmentation; man vs. dog; and the distinction between Isaac’s two love interests, the eroticized Sonia vs. the gentle, pious Shifra.

²³ From the very way Menahem denies having reached the “state of equanimity” we can understand precisely how clearly he has obtained it (*Only Yesterday*, 571), while Isaac Kummer is said to have achieved *hishtavut* upon settling in Jerusalem (368-369), particularly at the novel’s central scene as he recites Kaddish for his mother at the Western Wall, the tragic conclusion belies this claim, and shows his achievement to have been fleeting. For R. Kook’s description of *hishtavut*, see *Orot ha-Kodesh* III, 246 (compare this text to Menahem’s response to Isaac’s question, “And what could a person do not to be sorry?,” *Only Yesterday*, 571).

²⁴ S.Y. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 573. The symbols of hats and shoes are replete throughout the novel, and although variably interpreted are clear indicators for “that which is above and that which is below” (cf. *Hagiga* 2:1). Isaac being barefoot and bareheaded in the dream telegraphs his disconnect from both terrestrial and celestial Jerusalems.

²⁵ Dan Miron, “*Bein Shtei Neshamot*” in *Mi-Vilna le-Yerushalayim: Mehkarim Mugashim le-Prof. Shmuel Werses*, ed. D. Assaf (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002), 549-608; see at 604.

R. Kook had tried, often unsuccessfully, to communicate to that generation. Isaac is destroyed by the struggle between secular Zionism and fanatically religious Me'ah She'arim; he is unable to actualize a lifestyle where tradition and modernity, religion and Zionism, and the old world and the new can coexist—precisely the type of religious life and worldview that R. Kook had hoped for.

An earlier novel, *A Guest for the Night* (1939), fictionalizes Agnon's actual 1930 visit to his hometown of Buczacz. Having departed for Erets Yisrael in 1908, before his twentieth birthday, this was his only substantive return to the *Alte Heim*. (A very brief visit in 1913 took place during his father's final illness and shiva.) The narrator—"Guest," who the reader presumes to be an autobiographical projection of the author himself into his own story, spends a year attempting to revive the moribund Jewish life of the town but succeeds only in realizing "You can't go home again," and documenting the ways in which the town has deteriorated religiously, morally, culturally, economically, and socially.²⁶ In a novel with such elegiac reflections on Diaspora Jewry, we should not be surprised that Agnon also inserted a strong argument for Zionism. While R. Kook is similarly absent from the novel as a character, the Guest himself serves as a mouthpiece for his worldview, especially his well-known empathy for secular pioneers, whose work in building the land he viewed as religiously positive. During an encounter between the Guest, on one side, and the town's anti-Zionist rabbi and his son, a spokesman for the Agudah, Agnon puts into his narrator's mouth words which telegraph R. Kook's well-known teachings on these matters. When the rabbi heaps accusations on the irreligious Zionist youth in Erets Yisrael, the Guest comes to their defense:

"As for the young men of Israel," I said, "may I myself serve as expiation for their sins. They do not study like the scholars or pray like the pious men, but they plow and sow and plant, and give their lives for this Land that the Lord swore to give to our forefathers. That is why they have been privileged to have the Holy One, blessed be He, appoint them as guardians over His Land. Because they give their lives for the Land, He has entrusted the Land to them."

The rabbi's eyes filled with tears, but he paid no heed to his tears and said, "And what about the Sabbath?" A verse came to my mind: "And see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life [Psalms 128:5]," I quoted.

²⁶ On these themes in the novel see my "Agnon's Roman à Clef of Going Home Again" in S.Y. Agnon, *A Guest for the Night* (New Milford, CT: The Toby Press, 2014), vii-xviii.

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“‘See’ in the imperative. It is a man’s duty to see what is good in Jerusalem, and not the evil, heaven forbid. On the Sabbath,” I said to him, “Jews set their work aside and dress in goodly garments. He that can study, studies, and he that can read, reads, and he that can do neither strolls with his wife and children, speaking the Holy Tongue, and fulfilling in his own person the saying: ‘Everyone that walks four cubits in the Land of Israel and speaks the Holy Tongue is assured of life in the world to come.’”²⁷

That the Guest is serving as a sounding board for R. Kook’s teaching is apparent: although not cited in his name, the homily about “See the good of Jerusalem,” is explicitly one of R. Kook’s teachings.²⁸ In his study of the evolution of this novel, Steven Katz has uncovered that manuscript drafts of the story, as well as in its initial serialization in the *Ha’arets* newspaper, had the Guest pointedly quoting R. Kook in defense of the secular Zionists. Once again, in the final version of the story R. Kook’s teachings are more subtly communicated as part of the character’s dialogue.²⁹ It is unmistakable that Agnon is channeling that very worldview here, in the same way he does in *Only Yesterday* immediately prior to Isaac’s first encounter with Menahem, who more than anyone embodies this ideal. Isaac had completed his work as a day-laborer in the fields of the agricultural settlement of Ein Ganim (in today’s Petah Tikva), recalling the miracle tales of his ancestor Reb Yudel Hasid, hero of Agnon’s sprawling novel *The Bridal Canopy*, who had encountered one of the “Thirty-Six” hidden saints (the so-called *lamed-vav tsaddikim*): “That hidden saint dug mud for the daughters of Israel to plaster the ground of their houses in honor of the Sabbath, and on the Sabbath he would speak nothing but the Holy Tongue, and would not call his residence a home, for the residence of a man in the false world is not a home.” Contemplating his own generation in Erets Yisrael, populated by the type of secular pioneers R. Kook felt compelled to defend, Isaac smiled and said, “And I, Isaac, descendant of Rabbi Yudel Hasid, spent a weekday not with a hidden saint, but with a *host of hidden saints on whom the world stands*, and

²⁷ S.Y. Agnon, *A Guest for the Night*, 196-197.

²⁸ See, e.g., R. Ze’ev Gold’s report of having heard this from R. Kook: Haim Lifshitz, *Shivhei ha-Ra’ayah* (Jerusalem: Machon Harry Fischel, 1979), 207; Simcha Raz, *Malakhim ke-Venei Adam*, 230, 400; Yitzhak Dadon, *Sihat Avot* (Jerusalem: Machon Halakha Berura, 2005), 448-489, on *Avot* 5:5.

²⁹ Steven Katz, *The Centrifugal Novel: S.Y. Agnon’s Poetics of Composition* (Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1999), 52-55, for this and other examples of Rav Kook’s presence in draft versions of *A Guest for the Night*—all excised for the final print version of the book.

even on weekdays they speak the Holy Tongue, and they dig pits for manure to improve the earth of the Land of Israel. And as for their homes, homes built by the hands of their residents certainly deserve to be called homes.”³⁰

And yet, as an additional stand-in for the ideology of R. Kook, the coda to *A Guest for the Night* tells us of old Reb Shlomo Bach, who is the only character from Szybucz (the literary stand-in for the author’s own Buczacz) to both successfully settle the Land, having gone on *aliya* midway through the novel, and also to retain his commitment to tradition. Despite something of a tragic life, Reb Shlomo, too, achieves a measure of the tranquility and equanimity of Menahem. The long novel’s final chapter, set back in Jerusalem, recounts the Guest’s visit to Reb Shlomo, himself now settled in Ramat Rachel in old age, tending the *kibbutz* garden—like Menahem, he has become something of a pious farmer. “How did you come to work the garden?” the Guest inquires:

When I came to Ramat Rachel... I said to myself: Everyone is engaged in settling the land and I am doing nothing... so I lightened the gloom with the Torah and immersed myself in the Mishnah. When I reached the tractates that deal with the religious duties that are linked to the soil of the Land of Israel, I saw that my learning was rootless. I had studied these matters abroad and found no difficulty in them, but in the Land of Israel a man’s mind is renewed and he is not content with earlier interpretations. Once I said to myself: Let me go and see what is this tree of which the Sages spoke, and what is this field that is mentioned in the Mishnah [cf. *Avot* 3:7]. When I went out, I heard the young men talking to each other, and through their words the entire subject became clear. It was not that they were referring to the Mishnah, but they spoke as usual about trees and plants. I said to myself, wisdom cries outdoors [Prov. 1:20]. After that, whenever I found a difficulty in the words of the Mishnah I would go to one of our comrades. If he did not know, then the gardener knew. If he did not know how to explain in our way, he explained in his own way and showed me every single thing in tangible fashion. I found out from my own experience better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire [Eccl. 6:9]. I need not say much more; the Sages were right when they said, “There is no Torah like the Torah of the Land of Israel” [Genesis Rabba 16:14, Leviticus Rabba 13:5]. Here I am, some seventy years old, and I was not privileged to

³⁰ S.Y. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 176.

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understand the truth of the Torah until I came to the Land [cf. Mishna *Berakhot* 1:5].³¹

For Agnon, who loved to embed meaning in the names of his characters, it is no accident that Reb Shlomo's family name is Bach (ב"ח), written specifically as an acronym, the meaning of which seems to clearly point to the rabbinic work of the same name, *Bayit Hadash*, or "new home"—as if to say after the destruction of traditional society from within and without, the only hope for the continuation of that world was in the new world of Jewish revival in the Land (and later State) of Israel—where "learning leads to doing" as Reb Shlomo states, for "there is no Torah like the Torah of the Land of Israel," words Agnon knew well from R. Kook's teachings.³²

Given these examples, admittedly cherry-picked from a large canon of twenty-three volumes of collected writings, what might we say, then, about Agnon's appeal for R. Kook? We might suggest that Agnon, when he was with or without his *kippa*, was a bearer of tradition. Agnon imbibed the corpus of rabbinic literature and practice in a far more organic way than most of his predecessors and contemporaneous modern Yiddish and Hebrew writers, distilled it and cast it in the mold of modern Jewish literature. Perhaps R. Kook saw in Agnon a talent capable of actualizing his belief that literature and other arts draw out spiritual matters from potential to action. That is, in his view, literature is capable of embodying spirituality, of drawing forth the spiritual concepts that are embedded within the human soul. R. Kook is very clear on this point: "As long as there remains even one iota of creative work that has not been brought out into reality, as long as one artistic impulse has been left merely in potential, it is incumbent upon the artist to actualize it."³³

Dov Sadan served for many years as Agnon's literary assistant. In 1968, while Agnon was still alive, Sadan delivered a speech at the yearly conference of the *Aguddat ha-Soferim*, the Hebrew Writers' Association. We learn in the speech that the story "*Ha-Taba'at*" ("The Ring"), a short, enigmatic piece, is actually a parable about R. Kook. Agnon, who was famously reticent about interpreting his stories, had confessed to Sadan that "The Ring" was composed (or at least conceived) upon witnessing R. Kook's testimony to the Hope Simpson Royal Commission in the summer of

³¹ S.Y. Agnon, *A Guest for the Night*, 511. I have added the square-bracketed references here to aid in the unpacking of sources. Agnon only very rarely did that type of footnoting, assuming that readers either would or would not catch his references on their own, aiming instead for the richness and cadences of the rabbinic echoes.

³² See, e.g., Rav Kook, *Orot ha-Torah*, chapter 13 on "*Torat Erets Yisrael*."

³³ *Olat ha-Ra'ayah* II, 3.

1930, investigating the 1929 Arab uprising (in which Agnon's home had been marauded) and attempting to form a policy regarding the status quo of the contentious tinderbox that was the Western Wall. Agnon reported that R. Kook articulated to the commission a spirited defense of the covenant between the Jewish people and the Jewish land, and the One who unites them.³⁴

The story at hand, titled "The Ring, or The Infinite Story," is the tale of a bride, groom, and rabbi under the bridal canopy, replete with kabbalistic allusion: certainly the "infinite" (the "Ein Sof" of the title) is a central kabbalistic theme.³⁵ The short tale is profoundly engaged with the issue of concealment and revelation, of God concealing and revealing Himself, and presents itself as a cross between an Agnonian hasidic tale and *The Hobbit* (or at least Plato's *Republic*), as it features a magical invisibility ring. The narrator opens by assuring us that "the story is told exactly as it occurred," nevertheless, he tells us, it can be understood as a parable. This is a sophisticated literary move. If I tell you that what I am about to report is a true story (think, perhaps, of the journalistic ideal), then presumably that's the way it actually happened. No symbolism: just reporting the facts as they are. Nonetheless, this "actual" story is also a parable. How can it be both history and a parable? Because, we understand Agnon to be saying, there are points in history where the way it really was *becomes* a parable, and is transformed into a message for future generations. That's one of the secrets of Jewish history. We relate to past events both as if they really happened and as if they're simultaneously symbolic of other things as well. Thus, while the tale is told as it occurred, it can be interpreted as a parable for the Land of Israel. Hence, we have a double level of meaning: a parable for the Land of Israel, which, like a bride, was betrothed to the people of Israel.

In a preamble to the story, the narrator (quite atypically) lays out the symbols he will utilize: There is first the matter of the cup held by the rabbi officiating at the wedding. The cup points to "*kos yeshuot*," the cup of salvation, the overflowing cup, which the story's narrator tells us is "touching-yet-not-touching" (*mati ve-lo mati*). Here, we have a further kabbalistic concept: the closer one gets to God, the further away God

³⁴ Dov Sadan, *Pulmus u-Sheveh Pulmus* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1972), 126. Sadan (1902-1989) was a professor of literature and a politician, serving one term in the Knesset; he was a friend, confidant, and occasional assistant to Agnon.

³⁵ S.Y. Agnon, "*Ha-Taba'at o Ma'aseh she-Ain lo Sof*" in *Takhrikh shel Sippurim* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishing House, 2001), 251-253; originally published in *Ha'aretz* (October 7, 1948). Forthcoming in translation as "The Ring" in S.Y. Agnon, *Forevermore and Other Stories of the Old World and the New*, ed. J. Saks (New Milford, CT: The Toby Press, 2017).

seems. Thus touching-but-not-touching means one gets very, very close to some phenomenon or goal, but the horizon is ever-receding. For example, with a simplistic notion of what God is, things are not overly complicated. As one begins to understand how profound God really is, the paradox kicks in: the closer one gets, because, after all, knowledge brings us closer to the truth, the more one understand how far away He really is. Here the concept is applied to the Land of Israel and redemption. Before the messiah, returning to Erets Yisrael might be as close as we may draw to God, but it causes us to sense how painfully removed from Him we truly are.³⁶

Finally, the narrator spells out, we have an additional parable about “he who cannot be spoken of in parables.” Here, according to Sadan, Agnon is referring to R. Kook himself. We cannot speak about R. Kook even in parable, so, Agnon is playfully saying, I will tell you a parable about “he who cannot be spoken of in a parable.” Agnon’s characteristic reticence about inserting R. Kook into his fiction was overcome in this case by manufacturing a modern midrash about him, all the while admitting that it cannot be done because his essence cannot be contained in literature—he can be depicted neither metaphorically, nor non-metaphorically.

Our story reads like a fairy tale. A young man goes to betroth a woman. On the way he stopped at the goldsmith and bought a ring, which unbeknownst to him is a magical ring, one that renders the wearer invisible. No sooner has the groom placed the ring on the bride’s finger than she vanishes from sight. The groom stands dumbstruck then lets out a loud and bitter cry: “My bride, my bride! Where are you?” The bride responds, “I am here, I am here!” He cries out, “My bride, my bride, where?” She replies, “Standing right before you.” The bride’s voice cannot be heard above the tumult and the shouts of the groom, “Where is the bride? Where is the bride?” The bride hears the shouts but does not understand them. She thinks perhaps some calamity has befallen her wedding. Beating her hands on her head in anguish, the ring slips off, rendering her visible again. The wedding party asks, “Where have you been?” The bride answers, “I’ve been here the whole time.” The rabbi unrolls the marriage contract and reads the groom’s obligations to the bride, picks up the cup and recites the blessing: the first of the *sheva berakhot*. Spotting the ring at his feet, the groom stoops to pick it up. Lo and behold, he slips it onto his own finger and disappears. Tumult similarly ensues until the ring slips

³⁶ On the story’s kabbalistic symbols see Elhanan Shilo, *Ha-Kabbala be-Yetsirat S.Y. Agnon* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2011), 240-242, and also chapter 10 on kabbalistic interpretations of R. Kook and Agnon.

off his finger and he immediately reappears. The onlookers ask him, “How did you disappear from us? Where were you?” to which the groom responds, “I swear, I haven’t moved an inch from this spot.” Ultimately the rabbi spies the ring on the ground and picks it up. Beholding the ring in amazement, he fiddles with it, the ring comes to rest on his finger and now he vanishes along with the cup in his hand. Only his voice remains, heartily reciting the blessing that “Zion rejoices through her children.” If we unpack the symbols in the story—that groom and bride are likened to the Jewish people and the Land of Israel, we realize how remarkable it is that this couple has managed to stand under the *huppah* together, and that by extension the union of the wandering nation and its homeland is itself a source of joy and consolation for two thousand years of struggle and persecution and exile and the great catastrophes of Jewish history. Yet the “cup of salvation,” which indicates that despite our “first flourishing of redemption,” we are still quite far from our goal, has also disappeared and with it blurred the distinction between journey and destination. Ultimately Agnon tells us that this union comes at a cost: the *shadchan*, the rabbi that united them, has disappeared.

Through Agnon’s preface to the story (and Sadan’s filling in the blanks), the struggle to interpret the story is largely averted: The Jewish people and the Land of Israel, divided and “invisible” to each other for so long, have come together, but R. Kook is lost to us. R. Kook, a unique voice who was not fully appreciated, not in his own time and not after his time, is the one who helped to orchestrate the reunion. He taught *Torat Erets Yisrael*, which to a certain degree has been achieved and to a certain degree has been squandered. In any case, R. Kook’s voice is no longer present. There was no continuation, no one who came to replace him: he really was larger than life. The story concludes:

They heard the voice, but could not see the reciter of the blessing. They all began screaming, “Our Rabbi, our Rabbi, where are you?” But he was concealed, he was invisible, he blessed and said, “Who gladdens Zion through her children.” And a heavenly voice echoed from the earth repeating after him, “Who gladdens Zion through her children.”

The melancholy here is palpable: the uniqueness of R. Kook is no more. Yet one senses too an elegy for what was lost in not fully achieving the vision that the master put forth. Agnon is commenting on the state of Jewish life in Israel, with all of the blessing of *Erets Yisrael* and later the State, which R. Kook did not live to see, and sounding a plaintive note for what is still lacking, and for that which remains invisible.

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R. Kook and Agnon each gave voice to a particular moment in Jewish history, a moment of transition between the old and the new. A healthy society, in R. Kook's estimation, would have its own literature and arts. No longer would the sentiment of appropriating general culture into Jewish life dominate the scene. Jewish authenticity, rather, would be the cornerstone of the new society. And that is just where S.Y. Agnon entered the picture. R. Kook, who perceived himself as possessing the soul of an artist, recognized in Agnon a genius of genuine Jewish literature. Agnon, for his part, perceived R. Kook as a leader who, in the manner of an artist, unites disparate elements into a kind of holy unity. And, like the artist, R. Kook was the leader who disappeared, leaving his production to speak for itself as best it could.