

Maayanot (Primary Sources)

Agnon in Miniature: "Ahl HaTorah"

Norman Patz and Naomi Patz

The Israeli author Etgar Keret¹ recently offered his list of the best Israeli writers. All but one are alive today. The exception is Shmuel Yosef Agnon. Arnold J. Band² describes Agnon as "a peculiar fusion of the observant Jew and the uncompromising artist, who . . . speaks of and to the individual . . . For some readers, Agnon is the epitome of Jewish traditionalists; for others, he is the most daring of modernists." These characteristics are all evident in Agnon's very short story "Ahl HaTorah" (For the Torah), first published in 1939 in *Sefer HaMaasim* and included again in later collections.³

We were introduced to "Ahl HaTorah" by the principal of our daughters' school,⁴ who thought that, because the story takes place on Shabbat Shuvah, it would be ideally suited to serve as the basis for a *Kol Nidrei* sermon. And indeed it was. Shabbat Shuvah traditionally serves as a mood-setting preparation for Yom Kippur. The haftarah for the day consists of relevant passages from three of the Minor Prophets. Both Ashkenazi and Sephardi minyanim read Hosea 14:2–10, which begins *shuvah yisrael* ("Return, O Israel, to Adonai your God"). Traditional Ashkenazi congregations also read Joel 2:15–27, which speaks of God's compassion, while Sephardim instead read Hosea 14:2–10 and Micah 7:18–20, verses praising the God who forgives iniquity and transgression and will "take us back in love." All three passages constitute the Reform reading. "Ahl HaTorah," just 429 words long, touches on each of these themes. Here is our translation.

NORMAN PATZ (NY65) is rabbi emeritus of Temple Shalom of West Essex in Cedar Grove, New Jersey.

NAOMI PATZ (M.A., NY79) has authored or coauthored seven books and numerous plays and articles.

Ahl HaTorah

I was tired and too discouraged to get up. My hands and feet had ceased to obey me, as if I no longer had control over my limbs.

Adjacent to my room, some Sephardi Jews gathered for minyan. Out of love for their order and fondness for their forms of prayer, I was accustomed to praying with them although I myself am an Ashkenazi and there is an Ashkenazi synagogue in my neighborhood. But because of my feverish illness I had not gone for a number of months.

That particular day was Shabbat Shuvah and they had begun the service early in order to go to the city afterwards to hear the *chacham's* sermon.

From the phrases I heard, I realized that they had risen to take out the scroll to read the weekly portion. The rhythmic voice of Yedidiah Rafael Chai, the gabbai, stood out. His is the steady, hoarse voice that sounds like parchment being rolled.

Mr. Yedidiah Rafael Chai, the gabbai, had taken issue with me because I had compared the poets of today to our great poets Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol and Rabbi Yehudah Halevi. Nevertheless, he did not bear me a grudge. Not only that, but many is the time he called me for an *aliyah* even though another Levi was present.

My heart yearned to be called to the Torah this very day, after so many months of lying ill without communal prayer or Torah. I focused on drawing his thoughts to mine so that he would be reminded of me and call upon me. As I lay there, I heard him ask after me and heard them answer him: *Adam zeh k'var met* ("That man has died").

I sat up and shouted from my bed: *Ah-ni chai, ah-ni chai! M'yad ah-ni bah!* ("I'm alive, I'm alive! I'll be right there!").

I knew there was not enough time to get dressed, especially since my clothes were strewn about in various places. Nevertheless, I shouted again: "I'll be right there!"

How wretched the person who scatters his clothes before he goes to sleep. Many a time I had resolved to put my clothes in order when I took them off so that I would not be delayed when it was time to get dressed. But every time I got undressed, I'd forget about having to get dressed again.

There wasn't enough time for me to put on all of my clothes, just enough to cover myself up with a coat. I asked myself which one I

should put on. My hot weather coat? But, oh, that had been stolen by Arabs. The one for rainy days? But, oh, that one's heavy and the prayer room is small, with many men in it, and it is certain to be very warm there.

I did not let my thoughts slow me down. I jumped out of bed, stuck out my hand, pulled open the wardrobe and said whichever coat I chance upon first I will wear. I happened upon a short coat. And since it was so short that it didn't reach my knees, I put my heavy black coat on over it. That's the coat for cold weather, the one that covers the whole body and keeps it warm. And I hastened to enter the prayer room.

On seeing me, Mr. Yedidiah Rafael Chai, the gabbai, graciously called out: *Yaamod!*

I kissed the scroll and recited the blessing, all the while brooding that when ~~they~~ they summon a living man to the Torah in a minyan of the dead it is a sign that his death has been decreed. What, then, is the verdict for one about whom it is said in a minyan of the living that he is dead?

Before I arrived at a satisfactory answer, the *baal korei* chanted the last sentence of the *aliyah*: *Adonai badad yancheinu* ("God alone did guide him," etc).⁵ I kissed the scroll and recited the blessing *v'chayei olam nata b'tocheinu* ("Who has implanted within us eternal life"). Then I said the *Gomel* benediction, as is incumbent upon one who has recovered from an illness.

And Yedidiah Rafael Chai the gabbai, and the whole congregation with him, answered: "May the One who has shown you kindness, deal kindly with you forever. Selah."

Agnon's story is a compelling parable. Its very brevity invites close analysis. It is told in the first person as a recollection by a man whose name we do not learn. He is feverish, his limbs are unresponsive, and he has been lethargic for many months. Isolated by his illness, he has had no contact with the religious community, neither his own—the Ashkenazi—nor his adopted one—the Sephardi—for some time now. As a result, he has gone without public prayer and Torah for months. According to *Pirkei Avot*,⁶ Jews are forbidden to separate from the community. But the story's narrator has done just that. He has become a Jew without Torah, "like a body without a soul" (*k'guf b'li n'shamah*). His only contact with what apparently sustains him in life is the muffled sound of

voices coming through the wall his room shares with a tiny Sephardic prayer room, a very tenuous hold indeed.

On this day, Shabbat Shuvah, he yearns to return. He wants at the very least to be missed. It hasn't occurred to him that they think he's dead. When he hears the congregation chanting the prayers for taking the Torah from the Ark, he desperately longs to be called for an *aliyah*. He focuses his mental energy on the gabbai to "draw his mind" to him, to remember him and invite him to recite the blessings for the Torah. It works. The gabbai inquires after him, only to hear: *Adam zeh k'var met* ("That man has died").

The shock of hearing that others think him dead galvanizes him into a frenetic exertion of will. He shouts out, *Ah-ni chai, ah-ni chai!* ("I'm alive, I'm alive! I'll be right there!"). As he begins to get dressed, he reveals that he is disorganized. Is this distressing inability to keep his clothes in order another symptom of his spiritual collapse? Perhaps we are reading too much into it, but his physical disorganization is certainly troubling.

His desire to be called for an *aliyah* is the protagonist's moment of truth. He understands the summons to the Torah as a summons to renewed life. If he doesn't make it, then what the men told the gabbai is true: He is really dead. So he protests, "I'm alive!" He is frantic because he knows that he doesn't have enough time to get properly dressed. We learn from this something else about him. Despite his illness and lassitude, he knows what Torah portion is being read and, further, the division of the readings. He is a Levi so if he's called at all it will be for the second *aliyah*, and the parashah is *Haazinu*—Moses' poetic discourse in Deuteronomy 32. The first *aliyah* is very short, only six verses.

He panics. He only has time for a coat, the most external of garments. He attempts to make a mental selection but finds a reason for not being able to wear each of them. Given the brevity of the story, we presume that every element serves a purpose. Then why are we told that the coat has been stolen by Arabs? A key recurring theme in Agnon's work is the tension between tradition and modernity in all its gritty reality. Modernity, the world in which we live, is ambivalent, confusing, and tension-producing, but it is inescapable. Is "stolen by Arabs" here to bring a jarring reminder of the real world into the cocoon of the narrator's room and the minyan next door?

It is critically important to him to appear, so he must cover up. Ludicrously dressed in not one, but two coats, he rushes into the synagogue. The gabbai spots him and, with no apparent surprise, calls him up for the *aliyah*, that life-giving act of his redemption.

He pronounces the first blessing and, while the passage of the Torah is being chanted, tries to make sense of what he is experiencing. According to the narrator, a person who dreams of being called to the Torah by a minyan of the dead will soon die. But the opposite has happened to him. He who had become spiritually dead has been called by a living minyan. He is still struggling with this profound problem when the answer is thrust upon him: The *baal korei* chants the concluding phrase: *Adonai badad yancheinu* ("God alone did guide him").

In his heightened state of awareness, he interprets the Torah passage as a call for how to set his priorities: God alone must guide him. He acknowledges what a close call he's had by following his *aliyah* with the recitation of the public prayer of gratitude traditionally said by a person who has passed through terrible danger or recovered from a grave illness. He understands at last that failure of the spirit has threatened his very life. Having returned to Torah, having been returned by Torah to the community of the living, he has been rescued. His return, epitomized in the *Gomel* prayer, is validated by the congregation, the Jewish community—the agency that authenticates the identity and worth of the individual Jew—and the story ends.

The gabbai is fittingly named for his role. In Hebrew, *Yedidiah* means "Friend of God"; *R'fael* means "God is Healing"; *Chai* means "Life" and the word "gabbai" itself equals *shamash*, shepherd of his flock. The gabbai is mentioned four times, with his full name given every time.

The messages of the haftarah for Shabbat Shuvah—return, God's compassion, and praise of the forgiving God who will take us back in love—are made clear in the story. The themes of the climax of the *Un'taneh Tokef* prayer are also relevant. *T'shuvah* and *t'filah* are self-evident. The third, *tzedakah*, can be seen in the gabbai's calling the protagonist to the Torah: It is an act of healing mercy extended by Yedidiah Rafael Chai, the gabbai as God's representative, fulfilling his name by taking the protagonist back in love, healing him, and restoring him to life.

The aside about the protagonist's disagreement with the gabbai regarding the relative merits of the classical and modern poets also can be understood in the context of the tension Agnon posits between tradition and modernity. The gabbai rejects modernity in favor of an embrace of Torah tradition. The phrase "God alone did guide him" thus becomes a rejection of the modern world or, at the very least, an assertion that classical texts and the context of the observant community that transmits it must orient and ground our narrator in relation to the modern world. Arnold Band called his book on Agnon *Nostalgia and Nightmare*. Certainly one aspect of "nightmare" is the difficulty of attempting to reconcile tradition with contemporary knowledge; another is to separate authentic tradition from "nostalgia."

"*Ahl HaTorah*" is an excellent representation in miniature of Agnon's major themes: the tension between Jewish traditional life and the challenges of modernity, the subsequent loss of faith and identity, and Agnon's assertion that redemption can be achieved through Torah and community.

Notes

- 1.. "Etgar Keret: By the Book," *New York Times* Book Review, July 9, 2015.
2. In his masterful work *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), vii, 1.
3. Although Band indicates that Agnon reworked many of his stories, "*Ahl HaTorah*" appears unchanged in the 1941, 1951, and 1953 collections entitled *Samukh v'Nir'eh*, vol. 6 of *Kol Sipurav shel S. Y. Agnon—The Collected Stories of Shmuel Yosef Agnon*.
4. Hirsch Jacobson, z"l, was principal of the Solomon Schechter Day School in New Jersey. It is now known as the Golda Och Academy.
5. In recounting his experience, the protagonist cites only the first part of the passage, adding "v'go," an abbreviation for *v'gomer* (and so on). He takes for granted that whomever he is addressing knows the entire verse as well as he does. The full sentence, Deut. 32:12, reads: "God alone did guide him, with no alien god at His side."
6. *Pirkei Avot* 1:4.