Paytan and Paradox
An Analysis of Agnon's "Lefi haṣaᶜar hasakhar"*

ARYEH WINEMAN
New York

In reading a story by Agnon, the reader must be prepared for the possibility that the setting, the materials and the texture of the story point in a direction quite different from the ultimate meaning of the same story. "Lefi haṣaᶜar hasakhar"[1] is a short story with a medieval setting, the story of a paytan (poet) who wrote a piyut on the Akedah (binding of Isaac). The story is built upon motifs found in Jewish folklore, including the association of the Akedah with a test of almsgiving[2] and upon the figure, repeatedly occurring in Jewish folktales and in Agnon's own stories, of a diseased and often ungrateful character who serves as a test of charity.[3]

In the story, "Lefi haṣaᶜar hasakhar," the poet, Mar Rivi Tsidkiyahu, whose very name makes him in effect an allegorical representation of *ṣedaqah* (almsgiving), is above the need for a test of charity; the test therefore lies elsewhere, and the story uses folk-materials to shape them into a very different pattern, with themes not present in the type of folktales to which it bears similarity. As such, the story is a highly sophisticated creation whose building materials can be deceptive. The story which at first sight is built of the fabric of the folktale is both complex in design

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(1) האש והעצים, כל סיפוריו של שמואל יוסף עגנון VIII (1962), pp. 5–19. The story first appeared in *Ha'arets*, September 23, 1947.

(2) Zohar I, 10a–11b; note also Agnon's story, חוטב עצים in הכנסת כלה, כל סיפוריו של שמואל יוסף עגנון I (1953), pp. 300–305.

(3) Qiddushin 81a–b; Tanḥuma, ed. Buber, האזינו 8; Moses Gaster, *Exempla of the Rabbis*, 1924, No. 139; Midrash ᶜAseret Hadiberot in *Bet Hamidrash*, ed. Jellenik, I, pp. 82–83; מעשיות מצדיקי יסודי עולם, Shenkel (1903), 14, and רב ליבר included in M. Ben-Yeḥezkel, ספר המעשיות (1958), I. pp. 76 ff.

and profound in the patterns it employs: the crisis of faith in the face of tragedy and the paradoxical worldview which the story conveys and ultimately transcends.

I

The story is built in such a way that various Akedah-patterns are interwoven in the narrative and it is in fact possible to locate not one but four Akedot in the story. Central to the narrative is the akedah of the piyut itself. The poem written by Mar Rivi Tsidkiyahu describes the binding of Isaac and as such belongs to the type of piyut called Akedah. Moreover, the piyut itself undergoes an akedah; the "biography" of the piyut then parallels and exemplifies both its subject and its kind.

It was the habit of Mar Rivi Tsidkiyahu, the poet, each time he wrote a piyut to save a coin for the first beggar who would come to his door; according to the quality of the beggar, his manners and degree of learning, he would judge the worth of his poem. If the man turned out to be a virtuous beggar, the poet then considered his piyut worthy of being recited in the synagogue, while it would be discarded or even burnt if the beggar turned out to be a discourteous or unlearned man. It happened that the beggar who came following the writing of the Akedah-piyut was so afflicted in his health and appearance and so bitter, rejecting all the paytan's efforts to console him, that the poet sees in him a sign that his poem should be burnt. And accordingly Mar Rivi Tsidkiyahu burns the piyut to ashes.

The parallel with the binding of Isaac is explicitly suggested; the paytan had envisioned the ashes of Isaac while writing the piyut (p. 9). The motif of the ashes of Isaac appears in several midrashic sources. "When our Father Isaac was bound on the altar he was reduced to ashes and his ashes were cast upon Mount Moriah. The Holy One blessed be He immediately brought dew and resurrected him."[4] In our story, after burning the poem, the paytan "looked at the ashes (*'efer*) of his piyut" (p. 12). The burnt and forgotten piyut is resurrected many years later as it is heard emerging from the throat of the aged Mar Rivi Tsidkiyahu on Yom Kippur, but he tried in vain to write down its words "which were placed on his mouth like the ashes of Isaac placed on top of the altar" (p. 18).

The paytan has burnt a poem which he had thought to be a work of accomplishment and excellence; he sacrificed a poem which was extremely precious to him. In this, too, the piyut suggests Isaac, Abraham's son whom he loved. The completeness of the sacrifice is conveyed in that

(4) שבלי הלקט לרבנו צדקיה בר רב אברהם הרופא, ענין תפילה 18. Note also Midrash Hagadol on Gen. 22:19.

the poet not only burnt the piyut but also forgot the words. It is as though the act of forgetting were the result of a personal decision. "And concerning the Akedah-piyut, the righteous have mastery of their hearts; what they choose to forget they forget. The words of his Akedah were removed from his heart as though it had never been written" (p. 12). In addition, he ceased writing altogether (p. 12). The sacrifice is thus more than the annihilation of a single poem; it is the cessation of all his poetic endeavor.

Still other parallels appear between the biography of the piyut and the binding of Isaac as developed in aggadic traditions. After burning the piyut, the paytan feels ambivalence concerning what he has done, and he asks himself whether he can be certain that God wished him to burn it, especially in view of the passive role of the poet in his creation. Such ambivalence echoes the logical questionings and promptings which, according to aggadic traditions, Satan evoked in Abraham on his way to Mount Moriah.[5] The result of such ambivalence in the paytan is regret both for his having written the piyut and for his having destroyed it (p. 12).

The reader hears another echo of post-biblical traditions of the Akedah when, after the piyut returns, the paytan experiences anxiety as to whether this means that his original sacrifice was not accepted. Only after a *she'elat ḥalom* (a dream for which he prepared ritually to receive an answer from heaven), did he know that his Akedah was accepted. One recalls the comment found in the Zohar that "Abraham felt distressed when the angel said to him, 'Lay not thy hand upon the lad,' thinking that his offering was not complete and that his labour, his preparations and the building of the altar had all been in vain."[6] And in a midrashic source we find the following,

> And Abraham reflected in his heart and said, "Could it be perhaps that he was found unfit and therefore my sacrifice was not accepted?" A heavenly voice went forth and said to him, "Go eat your bread in joy . . . for God has already accepted your deeds."[7]

At the time of its writing, the piyut is described as "holy and awesome verses," and "awesome and wondrous verses" (p. 9). Both the awesomeness and the wonder of the poem are understood later in terms of the fate of that piyut: it is burnt to ashes by the poet following the visit of the beggar and it is restored to the poet's consciousness years after it had been erased from mind as well as parchment. In both the burning and the

(5) Tanḥuma, Vayera 22; Pesiqta Rabbati, Chapter 40; Yalquṭ Shimoni I, 101.
(6) Zohar I, 120b, Soncino translation.
(7) Vayiqra Rabbah 20:2. A parallel source occurs in Qohelet Rabbah on Eccles. 9:7.

resurrection, the biography of the piyut parallels the Akedah as it is described in later tradition:

> Rabbi Eli^{c}ezer says, when the sword touched Isaac's neck his soul flew away, and when the Holy One blessed be He spoke from between the cherubim and said, "do not strike the lad, nor do anything to him," his soul returned to his body and he stood upon his feet. He knew that in this way the dead are destined to live and he opened his mouth and said, "Blessed is He who resurrects the dead."[8]

The poem is an Akedah by genre, and this particular Akedah-poem itself became an akedah, sacrificed by its poet and later restored to life.

Not only the piyut, but also the paytan undergoes an akedah of the same basic pattern. As a foreshadowing of later events we read, "And so he would sit and create verses as the sacred poets who in their poems bind their hearts to God's awe, may He be blessed" (p. 9). The events described in the last pages of the story suggest a pattern of death and revival for the paytan. The reader finds him in the synagogue, confined to his bed where he says: "I am like one who has been thrown into a deep pit and is unable to get out." (p. 14). The word for "pit" is *bor*, a word which bears the connotation of the grave.[9] Later, however, he gets up from his bed and regains strength to lead the congregation in prayer. "The spirit of life entered into him" (p. 16). This pattern recurs further on with an apparent death of the paytan resulting from the trauma of uttering his long-forgotten Akedah-piyut (p. 17). The *kohanim* (Jews of priestly descent forbidden to have any contact with the dead) leave the synagogue thinking he has in fact died. When he regains his strength and chants the concluding *ne^{c}ilah* prayer of Yom Kippur, he calls these very *kohanim* to recite the Priestly Blessing. The tradition of Isaac's death and resurrection echoes in these happenings.

When on that Yom Kippur, the aged bedridden poet requests his grandson to take him to the reader's desk in the synagogue, he uses the words "*qaḥeni veqorveni el hateva*" (p. 16). The word *qaḥ* (take) is the imperative found in Genesis 22:2 as God tells Abraham to take his son and offer him. The second verb in the paytan's command to his grandson is "*qorveni*" (bring me near), which has the same root as the verb *lehaqriv* (to sacrifice).

The paytan began reciting his poem in the synagogue but suddenly

(8) Midrash Hagadol on Gen. 22:12. See also Pirqe Derabbi Eli^{c}ezer, Ch. 31.
(9) Isaiah 14:15.

ceased, and then we are told of his vision. He beholds six angels above him on each side resounding with voice and words. "Mar Rivi Tsidkiyahu covered his face with his prayer-shawl and closed his eyes in order not to look at the *Kavod*" (the Divine Presence at the scene of revelation). Echoes of the revelation scenes of Ezekiel 1 and Isaiah 6 are heard in this passage, but the reader recalls also those traditions according to which Isaac beheld the angels of the upper worlds at the moment he was about to be slaughtered. The Targum Yerushalmi on Genesis 22:9 reads "The eyes of Abraham looked at Isaac's eyes, and the eyes of Isaac looked at the angels on high. Isaac saw them but Abraham did not see them." According to still another source, the altar upon Moriah was built opposite the Divine Throne.[10] And the commentary of Judah ben Barzillai Albargeloni on Sefer Yeṣira reports that Isaac at that fateful moment "saw the light of the Shekhina (Divine Presence), and his soul flew away and the blessed One resurrected him . . ."[11] This revelation scene is included also in the paytan's reflections on the original Akedah account, "The heavens opened and Isaac began to see the Shekhina in the heavens above him ready to receive him" (p. 15).

The epilogue of the story opens with reference to two tales, one concerning Mar Rivi Tsidkiyahu, the other concerning his poem (p. 18). There are within the story two additional Akedot. One of them is that of Isaac himself. The story contains a paraphrase of the first part of the Akedah account as it takes form in the consciousness of the paytan on that last Yom Kippur in the synagogue (pp. 15–16). That account extends to the point of Abraham's attempt to kill his son and there it ends abruptly. The account is a recreation of the biblical narrative in a midrashic idiom and in the form of the continuous narrative as found in such a medieval work as Pirqe Derabbi Eli'ezer. The narrative is embellished with phrases and comments from the midrashim along with some midrashic elements original with the author. He provides, for example, an etymology of the name Moriah. The classical midrashim explain the name of the mountain in terms either of the word *hora'a* (instruction or *yir'ah* (fear); another etymology which sometimes appears relates it to the spice, myrrh.[12] Agnon too relates the name to *hora'a* but he becomes much more explicit

(10) Yalquṭ Shimoni I, 101.

(11) Judah ben Barzillai Albargeloni, Commentary on Sefer Yeṣirah (1885), p. 125.

(12) Bereshit Rabbah 55:7; Tanḥuma, ed. Buber, I, 112; Yalquṭ Shimoni I, 101. Targum Onkelos explains Moriah as ארעה פולחנא (land of the cult) which Rashi explains in connection with the myrrh and other spices used in the cultic ritual. Nachmanides, commenting upon Gen. 22:2, explains that from the Temple which was later built on the very site of the Akedah, instruction (הוראה) went forth to Israel.

and adds a logic not discernable in the classical sources: "For from it there went forth instruction to the world concerning the strength of the love of God" (p. 15).

According to the same paraphrase, upon seeing the sight of the father about to slaughter his son the angels shouted and their tears fell upon the knife, causing pain to Abraham's hand as he sought with all his might to carry out the command. Also this motif of the angel's tears weakening the force of the knife is found in the midrashim.[13] But, adopting this aggadic tradition, Agnon creates his own midrash, relating this to another verse of the Bible, seemingly remote from the Akedah: "Many waters are not able to extinguish love" (Song of Songs 8:7). The midrashim on the Song of Songs relate various verses of that book to events in Israel's history such as the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the Torah, the construction of the Tabernacle, but not to the Akedah. The exalted expression of love from Song of Songs raises the emotional level of the Akedah. The theme of God's great love, with which the section concludes, lends its tone to the whole of Agnon's midrashic paraphrase: The Akedah is seen not only as an act of obedience, but also as an act of love. In addition, the Akedah with the motif of the angels' tears falling on the knife provides a context for the verse from Song of Songs. Agnon has given us his own midrash with the same effect of surprise which the classical midrash evokes by connecting elements which seem to be totally unrelated.

The fourth Akedah in the narrative, the fourth Isaac-figure, is the *helekh* (wanderer) who, like Isaac himself, is referred to as *ʿolato shel Makom* (God's own offering). In the beggar, the paytan experienced suffering in an immediate way; the binding of Isaac became significantly more real to him. The beggar is like the archetypal Isaac-figure revealed to the poet in his personal experience.

In order to spell out more precisely the reality suggested by the figure of the *helekh*, one must consider the signs of the author's own presence — in the paytan's description and in his style and way of writing.

In a way that recalls Agnon's use of the classical Jewish sources, the paytan "examines every letter to see if it has a basis in Scripture or in the words of the sages" (p. 8). And like Agnon he is sparing of words to the

(13) Bereshit Rabbah 56:7; Midrash Hagadol I on Gen. 22:9. Other sources mention the tears as coming from Abraham himself: Yalquṭ Shimoni I, 101, and Vayosha in Jellinek, *Bet Hamidrash* 1, p. 37. The crying of the angels is mentioned also in Pirqe Derabbi Eliʿezer, Ch. 31, Pesiqta Rabbati, Ch. 40, and Yalqut Shimoni on Isaiah 33:7. The Zohar repeats this tradition adding that the angels of peace "wept when they saw Abraham binding Isaac, the upper and the lower beings trembled and shook, and all on account of Isaac" (Zohar I, 120, Soncino translation).

fullest (p. 8). The reader senses that in writing about the paytan, Agnon is actually describing his own style. This comes out most clearly in the conclusion of the first chapter of our story.

> And for every *ashmura* or *tokhaḥa* or *teḥina* or *seliḥa* or *pizmon* or *hoshana* (various types of liturgical poetry) that Mar Rivi Tsidkiyahu wrote, he created a melody which directs the words according to the theme, and the melody filled the hearts even of simple-minded people who lack understanding in these things (p. 6).

Mention of the melody which inspires even those unable to attain a full understanding of the piyut brings to mind the suggestion of Dov Sadan that many of Agnon's stories have a double-level, with the surface narrative making sense as an autonomous story in itself while at the same time allusions and symbols point to another story located on a deeper, hidden level. The reader who does not recognize the complex of allusions can still appreciate and understand the story on one level, while the astute reader, at home in the world of Jewish sources, can reach that other story more deeply concealed within the revealed narrative.[14]

All of the above considerations suggest that behind the archaic setting of our story lies something contemporary with the biographical Agnon. The identification is even more carefully prepared. The story does not simply concern an isolated figure who suffers and defies consolation; the *helekh* appears against a background of collective distress and persecution of Jewry. From the very first page the reader is made aware of the time of immense persecution in which the story has its setting; and he is led on to the interpretation of the beggar as symbol of a collective reality. The sense of martyrdom, *qiddush-hashem*, appears even in the words expressive of redemption: "*sheyeqadesh haqadosh barukh hu et shemo*, that the Holy One blessed be He will sanctify His name in the world which He created according to His will and will renew His Kingdom over us . . ." (p. 6). Furthermore, when the *helekh* first appears in the story mention is made of his staff (p. 10), a conventional symbol for exile and wandering. The massive martyrdom and cause of homelessness contemporary with the life of the author is, of course, the Holocaust, and "Lefi haṣaᶜar hasakhar" was published, in fact, only two years after the end of World War II.

II

A story in which the central figure is a poet requires an examination of the

(14) Dov Sadan, מסה עיון וחקר, על ש״י עגנון (1967), pp. 88–89.

role of art and of the artist as it is reflected within the story. In our story that role is complicated by allusions to different facets of the artist.

We are told that one of the functions of the piyut was to provide consolation under persecution (p. 6). But when this particular *helekh* came to his door, the paytan found himself totally incapable of comforting him. He spoke to the beggar of a world of values which was irrelevant in his present situation. The paytan grasped the implication for himself: if he is unable to console this single *helekh*, then he has failed in the purpose of his poetic activity (p. 12).

Following this conclusion the paytan was still about to return to his piyut (p. 11), in effect to return to art as usual. Only then did he realize that this beggar was the sign by which to judge his piyut. The esthetic criterion in itself has lost its validity. The paytan, on the basis of esthetic experience and standards, is impressed with his own creation, but the *helekh* directs him to a different conclusion, one requiring him to burn his most precious of poems. It is then that the paytan gives thought to his role as an artist and to the role of art itself in a world symbolized by the *helekh*. "As though that were not enough, I make of God's own offering a kind of poetry" (p. 12).

Not only has he failed; the very endeavor of art itself has in it something criminal in nature for it creates beauty out of the subject-matter of human suffering. The *helekh* has become not only an evaluation of one particular Akedah-piyut but also a divine sign concerning the justification of art as such. Barukh Kurzweil drew our attention to this critique of art in the story, noting the paytan's decision to cease writing altogether, as though art has no justification in the kind of reality that discloses itself in the *helekh*—whom Kurzweil also saw as a symbol of the Holocaust.[15]

There are yet other facets of the artist in the story which, when examined, might open new directions for understanding the work. The artist writes passively. The writing of the piyut is described as though the pen itself did the writing, without the paytan having anything to do with it; "His pen raised itself between his fingers" (p. 9). The artist writes as if controlled by a will other than his own.

Later when the burnt and forgotten piyut is restored on that last Yom Kippur, the poet has an equally passive role. "Even though he had burnt his Akedah, it rose from within his throat" (p. 16) without any act or intention on his part. The same passivity is echoed in still other ways. The paytan's acts of charity are described as though his hands give alms on

(15) Baruch Kurzweil, מסות על סיפורי ש"י עגנון (1966), pp. 316–318.

their own without his direction: ". . . his hands give charity by themselves . . ." (p. 13). The same passivity is felt also in the cries of the *helekh* which emerge from his ailing skin, not from the beggar as a person; "My sufferings cry out from within my flesh" (p. 11). The expression used for the return of the piyut independent of the paytan's will: "it rose from within his throat" (p. 16), along with this entire sense of passivity, suggest a significant strain within hasidic thought. Both Joseph Weiss[16] and Rifka Schatz-Uffenheimer[17] in their published researches on the Maggid of Mezhirech and his disciples have stressed the quietistic temperament in which after stilling all one's own powers and will and annulling one's own external personality, one senses that God is acting within the person and speaking through the words and voice of the person. Man becomes simply the vessel through which God speaks and he displays no more activity in the process than that displayed by a musical instrument or a craftsman's tool.

One source relating to the Maggid of Mezhirech is of special significance for our story.

> Once I heard the Maggid of blessed memory state explicitly "I will teach you the best way of pronouncing Torah, which is as follows—not to be aware of oneself (*ʾeyno margishʾ et ʿaṣmo*) but as an ear hearkening to the way in which the 'World of Speech' speaks within one. It is not he himself who speaks. As soon as he hears his own words, let him stop!" On many occasions I have seen him (sc. the Maggid) with my own eyes, I myself, when he opened his mouth to speak the words of Torah; he appeared to everyone as if he were not in this world at all, but as if the *Shekhina* were speaking from his throat. And sometimes, even in the middle of a subject or in the middle of . . . a word he would stop and wait for a while.[18]

The words, "as if the *Shekhina* were speaking from his throat" recall the expression found in our story, *veʿalta mitokh gerono*, "and it rose from within his throat" (p. 16). A similar expression occurs in the words of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman, also a disciple of the Maggid of Mezhirech:

> And I have seen this in the case of very pious men that while cleaving to the upper worlds and liberated from the coverings of physical

(16) Joseph Weiss, "Via Passiva in Early Hasidism," *Journal of Jewish Studies* XI, No. 3–4 (1960), pp. 137–155.

(17) Rifka Schatz-Uffenheimer, החסידות כמיסטיקה (*Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth Century Hasidic Thought*). Jerusalem, 1968.

(18) אור האמת 95c. The translation is from Weiss, p. 150.

reality, the *Shekhina* rests upon them and speaks through their throats, and their mouths speak prophecies, and afterward the pious men themselves know nothing of what they had been saying, for they cleave to the upper worlds and the *Shekhina* speaks through their throats.[19]

This expression, reflecting the quietistic current in hasidic thought, is used in our story to suggest the passive role of the artist. The revelation scene in the context of our story implies that art comes from a divine source and emerges from the upper worlds just as Isaac himself had uttered song when his eyes beheld the divine vision as he was about to be slain (p. 15). The strongest expression of this concept in our story concerns a piyut supposedly written after the time of Mar Rivi Tsidkiyahu:

Mar Rivi Tsidkiyahu raised his hands toward Heaven and said, *ʾiyleni veʾamṣeni merifyon vaḥil*[20] ("Strengthen me from weakness and pain"). And now *ʾiyleni veʾamṣeni merifyon vaḥil* was composed several generations after Mar Rivi Tsidkiyahu; however, all the poems which our masters the holy paytanim write are first written on high, and if there is need that these words be said below they are revealed to the paytan and he writes them. If there is no need for these words to be said below they remain floating in the high heavens, but the precious and elect of every generation sense them and utilize them in the context of their own relationship with their Father in Heaven. Thus Mar Rivi Tsidkiyahu in this case used a piyut which was written many years later (p. 14).

Seeking a source for such a concept within ḥasidic teaching, we find in *Siḥot Haran* the following:

Everything is from above, for it would not be possible to attain any idea except that the mind sparks with that wisdom. For intuition comes to the sage and researcher from above, for when the time comes for an idea or device to be disclosed to the world, then that idea is sent to that mind from above in order that it be revealed to the world. For certainly earlier sages had also investigated the identical problem. And why didn't they attain the same technique or invention? But truthfully everything comes from above and when the time

(19) מאור ושמש 51a, quoted in Schatz-Uffenheimer, pp. 118–119.

(20) These words appear in the piyyut, יראתי בפצותי שיר להשחיל, by Yequtiel ben Moshe included in the reader's repetition of the ʾamidah of shaḥarit, on the first day of Rosh Hashana. Daniel Goldsmidt, מחזור לימים הנוראים I, p. 61.

comes for that matter to be revealed to the world, then one's mind sparks with the necessary intuition.[21]

In the beginning of the story we are told that the paytan and those of his class turn to the writing of poetry as a disguise for the teaching of Torah. Theirs was a time of intense persecution when Torah and its great scholars had disappeared. Furthermore it was forbidden to teach Torah, and it was necessary to seek indirect ways of teaching. The paytanim then turn to the piyut as a device to strengthen the spirits of the Jews so that they might be able to stand the tests of their times and accept those tests in love. The piyut thus served as a disguise; it is the use of one medium to convey what normally belongs to another. This background echoes the explanation of the piyut as found in *Sefer haʿitim* of Rabbi Judah b. Barzillai Albargeloni. "There was a time," he says, "when the Jews were forbidden by their oppressors to engage in the study of the Law. The learned men among them, therefore, introduced the custom of mentioning in the course of the prayers the laws of the festivals and the laws of the Sabbath and religious observance and exhorting the common people in regard to them, by means of hymns, thanksgivings, rimes and Piyyutim."[22] When Torah is in danger of being forgotten and cannot be expressed in its own medium, art becomes a substitute for Torah.

Behind this entire conception of art lies the assumption that art has a specifically social character. It is communicable and is created to serve as a means of communication between man and man. By the conclusion of the long introductory section of the story, however, this conception of art and of the artist undergoes a change. "And Mar Rivi Tsidkiyahu was in seclusion with his Maker. This is a great quality of the level of the pious, for whom the most important of their deeds are known only to themselves" (p. 8). The esthetic activity of the paytan now receives a different stamp. It no longer serves as communication directed toward the world of man; the piyut now belongs rather to the realm of things between the individual person and God. It is no longer of any importance that the congregation accepts the piyut.

This concept of the artist bears similarity to a motif from Jewish lore which greatly attracted Agnon. He wrote several stories using the motif of *haṣadiq hanistar*, the hidden righteous man whose saintly acts are completely hidden from the eyes of man.[23] And the very next chapter of our

(21) שיחות הר"ץ #5.

(22) Albergeloni, ספר העתים (1902), p. 252 as quoted in Israel Davidson, *Maḥzor Yannai. A Liturgical Work of the VIIth Century* (1919), Introduction, xvii.

(23) Two such stories סוכת שלום, pp. 206–213 and עבודה pp. 283–285, are included in

story opens with the time designation, *ben kese le'asor*, between the first of the month of *Tishre* when the moon is hidden (*kese*) and Yom Kippur, the tenth day (*'asor*) of that month (p. 8). While the word *kese*, in the light of the context, refers to the moon which is hidden as the monthly cycle is about to begin, it suggests also the paytan who is a *nistar*, a hidden figure. He is hidden from the human world as his poetic activity comes more and more to belong to the realm of things which exist between man and God.

III

Initially the type of beggar served as a sign from God to indicate the quality of the paytan's creation. This criterion assumed a basically rational world in which the beggar could in fact serve as a sign to evaluate the piyut; what happens below parallels what occurs above, namely God's acceptance or rejection of the particular piyut. In the opening chapter of the story, the functions of Mar Rivi Tsidkiyahu are defined as standing as judge between man and his fellow-man and also as standing in prayer between Israel and their Father in heaven (p. 5). This definition of functions and its careful wording goes far to suggest such a parallel between the two worlds, between the world of man and his happenings and the divine world. A bit later the formula concerning piyutim is given, "because they were accepted above, they were accepted below" (p. 8). There is still a very direct relationship between the two worlds. The principal concern of the poet is the acceptance of his piyut in the upper world, and its acceptance below is a consequence of that divine acceptance.

It is the Akedah situation alluded to in the figure of the beggar which breaks that sense of logic. The apparent discrepancy begins to appear following the coming of the beggar. The paytan, on an esthetic level, is conscious of the worth of his verses, but the sign given to him in the nature of the beggar indicates the very opposite. "According to their quality, they merited to be recited in the synagogues on Yom Kippur; according to the type of the beggar, they should be burnt" (p. 11). We then find a variation of the formula:

> All the poems which our masters the holy paytanim write are first written on high, and if there is need that these words be said below they are revealed to the paytan and he writes them. If there is no need for these words to be said below they remain floating in the high Heavens. . . . (p. 14)

הכנסת כלה. Also עינינו הרואות in אלו ואלו, כל סיפוריו של שמואל יוסף עגנון II (1953), pp. 404–409; עיר ומלואה in הצדיק הנסתר pp. 220–227, and האש והעצים in והחיצונים, pp. 130–137.

The positions of the piyut in the two worlds are not necessarily equivalent, but neither are they contradictory.

Then, following the return of the piyut, the paytan attempted to write its words down on paper, but the words would not cling to the paper, and the reason is given, "After the Akedah is accepted above, there is no longer any need for it below" (p. 18). The correspondence between the worlds is now totally broken; there is no longer any correspondence between the world as man recognizes it and truth in itself. The shattering of such logical parallels is further intensified: the piyut's melody as it is heard in the poet's heart has changed significantly, for what is pleasant on earth is not similar to what is pleasant in the heavens (p. 18). The two worlds are no longer equivalent and one cannot judge from events as seen from below how these same events are considered above. The Akedah negates the basic rationality of the world, and in place of the older principle of a correspondence between the worlds, the paytan receives a new principle which lends its name to the story: "according to the trouble is the reward." In this way the reader can trace in the story a progression from rationality to paradox, a progression which corresponds to the change in the conception of art: the piyut is accepted, but its words do not cling to paper, for there is no need for it in the human world.

Justice collapses along with rationality in the world. In the beginning, Mar Rivi Tsidikiyahu is introduced as a *dayan* (judge), and to every question which comes before him in that capacity he would give a clear answer (p. 5). His ability to provide clear answers to life's questions continued until the encounter with the *helekh* which baffled his intellect. From that point on there are no clear answers. The justice which the *dayan* meted out stands in sharp contrast to the painful phenomenon of the *helekh* which defies any sense of justice in the world. The criterion by which the paytan would judge assumed the presence of justice in the world: for a good piyut God would reward him with an honorable beggar and vice versa. That consistency is now shattered.

Along with rationality and justice, the world of faith is also shattered in the encounter with the *helekh*. The reflections which led to the writing of his Akedah centered around the question: From where do we acquire the *koaḥ* (strength) to endure persecutions and to accept them in love? The *koaḥ* referred to is definitely of a non-physical kind. The paytan's question recalls the question which Bialik posed in his poem "*ʾIm yesh et nafshekha lada ʿat*"[24] where the poet located the answer in the bastions of Torah. Mar

(24) Ḥaim Naḥman Bialik, כל שירי חיים נחמן ביאליק (1962), pp. 81–83.

Rivi Tsidkiyahu locates it in the Binding of Isaac, and he considers that episode an act of God's lovingkindness, for from Isaac's act of sacrificing himself his descendents received the *koaḥ* continuously to reenact the Akedah in their own lives.

> All Your wonders and thoughts are for our own sake that Isaac should offer himself before Him, in order that we should be able to endure in the world, for from our father Isaac has come to us this *koaḥ* with which we give our lives for You (p. 9).

The use of the word *koaḥ* in this very sense occurs in the book *Bet Yaʿakov* in which Rabbi Jacob Aharon ben Moshe of Zalshin discusses the Akedah in connection with the liturgy of the eve of Rosh Hashana:

> The root of holiness which grows in the heart of every Jew in each generation to give his life for Torah and the divine service and for the Sanctification of God's Name—all this grew out of the great *koaḥ* of our father Abraham who bequeathed it to his children after him, as it is written, "in order that he will command his sons and his household after him and they will keep the way of the Lord," etc., and this was the essence of the covenants which God made with Israel concerning his seed that they shall have this *koaḥ*, for without it they are not called his seed . . . By means of the Akedah he inspired his children after him to give their lives for the Sanctification of God's name.[25]

The pious acceptance of suffering along with the consolation of faith is heard in this use of the word *koaḥ*. The term later recurs when the paytan attempts to console the beggar and encourage him in terms of a religious frame of reference, and the *helekh* retorts, "I haven't the *koaḥ* to confront this man; my suffering shrieks from within my flesh and he says 'God will save'" (p. 11). The paytan is unable to convey to him a sense of his own *koaḥ*; his pious speech and attitudes are irrelevant to the sufferer. The reader notes the word *koaḥ* later in the paytan's reflections upon the Akedah where it signifies the extent of Abraham's love of God. "They reached Mount Moriah whence instruction goes forth to the world concerning the extent of the *koaḥ* of the love of God" (p. 15). And in a similar vein, the paytan rose from his sickbed to recite his Akedah with great *koaḥ* (p. 15).

The archaic style as well as the medieval setting of the narrative has an

(25) ערב ראש השנה (1899) בית יעקב על התורה ומועדי השם. Agnon included an excerpt from this section of the book in ימים נוראים (1956), pp. 48–52.

ironic effect as a very contemporary kind of world comes through in the story. Following various signs and allusions in the text we have followed a steady progression from rationality to paradox, and the reader cannot help but think of the affinity to the kind of world reflected in the stories of Franz Kafka which suggest "the failure of reason to understand a world which is itself not logical."[26] In a similar way also in "Lefi haṣa^{c}ar hasakhar" our sense of reality becomes disconnected from the truth. Our world does not reflect the higher world; the piyut disappears from our world, yet it continues to exist in a truer sense in the higher world.

And yet there is a vast gulf between the paradoxical reality reflected in Kafka and that which is sensed in "Lefi haṣa^{c}ar hasakhar." Kafka never proceeds beyond the fact of paradox. There is no road to the Castle, nor any certainty that the Castle actually exists; nor does one know that the Emperor exists in "The Great Wall of China."[27] In our story by Agnon, the shattering of logic and order in the world directs the reader to another order, to the existence of a higher order of things which is not grasped by our logic or our experience. The truest reality is hidden from our eyes, yet the fact of its presence is disclosed. The paytan continues to utter his Akedah with great *koaḥ*, and his piyut is accepted by the higher world, even while it is not accepted below. A true understanding of events is not found in the world accessible to us, and we cannot judge from events seen below how these same events are considered from above.

In this story, Agnon recalls to the reader an earlier storyteller and teacher in whose complex of ideas a similar conception of paradox was deeply embedded. Rabbi Naḥman of Bratzlav viewed rational thought as a never ending maze caught up in its own inner contradictions and he ruled out all endeavors to equate reason with faith or to find in reason a pathway to God. According to Rabbi Naḥman, God exists beyond the grasp of reason. Reason is necessarily unable to grasp Him according to implications which Rabbi Naḥman drew from basic concepts of Lurianic Cabbala. In the thought as well as the narratives of Rabbi Naḥman there is no bridge between our ways of thinking and ultimate truth; his is a world whose very existence is dependent upon and rooted in paradox.[28] In the sixth of Rabbi Naḥman's tales, "*Ma^{c}aseh bemelekh vehaya lo ḥakham*,"[29] logic and experience suggest that there is no King of truth at the helm of the

(26) Shimon Sandbank, "On the Structure of Paradox in Kafka," (Hebrew), *Hasifrut* I, Spring, 1968, pp. 11–16.

(27) Franz Kafka, *The Great Wall of China and Other Stories* (1933), pp. 136–159.

(28) See Joseph Weiss, הקושיה בתורת רבי נחמן מברצלב in עלי עין, *S. Z. Schocken Jubilee Volume* (1952), pp. 245–289. Included in Weiss, מחקרים בחסידות ברצלב (1974), pp. 109–149.

(29) ספר ספורי מעשיות (1968), pp. 40–42.

world, but the wise man defied that logic in persisting in his search and he found the ultimate truth to be different. The lower world is a world of falsehood, yet the King is a king of truth; a higher order is affirmed even when not attested to by worldly evidence.

Like the Akedah, so the Holocaust is a reality which baffles human reason, negates justice and uproots faith. According to our analysis, the paytan in the story is the man of faith who encounters the reality of the Holocaust and, in the light of that tragedy, must revise his orientation to the world. His approach and his affirmation of a more ultimate meaning and order have roots in the paradoxical view of the world found in the teachings of Rabbi Naḥman of Bratzlav.

Through our analysis we have approached more and more closely the thinking of Rabbi Naḥman of Bratzlav, and we may speculate that in part the story was inspired by that ḥasidic teacher who once ordered his close followers to burn one of his own writings. While in Lemberg in the spring of 1808, after much weeping, Rabbi Naḥman explained that he had at his home in Bratzlav a "*sefer qadosh venora*', a holy and awesome book," but he realized that because of this book both his first wife and his son had died and he felt that, if the book is not destroyed, he too would die in Lemberg. He gave the key of his house to Rabbi Shimon and commanded him to travel immediately to Bratzlav to burn there the two extant copies of the book. Rabbi Shimon met with illness on the way but nevertheless continued on his journey and burnt the book as his master had commanded him.[30]

In another section of the same source we read that Rabbi Naḥman "was able to kindle a fire and to send something to the Emperor Himself . . . sometimes I write something and burn (it). I send the thing by means of the smoke . . ."[31]

(30) נסיעתו ללמבורג, חיי מוהר"ן #3 (1962), pp. 72–73.
(31) *Ibid.*, Part II, גדולת נוראות השגתו #2, p. 7.