

The omitted title in ‘At the Outset of the Day’: Agnon’s perception of his role as a writer

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ABSTRACT My aim in this article is to analyse Agnon’s story ‘At the Outset of the Day’ in an attempt to unravel a hermeneutical riddle that has not yet been settled. The main question driving the analysis, and which gives rise to additional questions, is in what way does revealing the title of the book, which the narrator identifies by saying ‘[i]t was the book that I had written’, contribute to our understanding of Agnon’s perception of his role as a writer? This study is based on a synchronic and diachronic reading of Agnon’s story. A diachronic analysis of the text’s five published versions and two handwritten manuscripts serves to reveal the title of the text alluded to in the story. A synchronic analysis reveals major themes in Agnon’s work that are directly related to the surreptitious title of the mentioned book, as well as to its mysterious omission. The comprehensive picture that emerges from the convergence of the synchronic and diachronic readings leads to a clearer understanding of Agnon’s perception of his role as a writer.

THE STORY initially published in 1943 in the literary journal *Moznaim* under the title ‘Between the House and the Courtyard’ (*Bein habait velehatzer*) was subsequently changed several times. About a decade after its original publication it was included in the volume of *Agnon’s Complete Works* titled ‘To This Day’ (*Ad hena*), where it appeared under a new title, the one familiar to most Agnon readers, ‘At the Outset of the Day’ (*Im knisat hayom*).¹

1. S.Y. Agnon, *To This Day* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Schocken, 1952), pp. 171–7; see also the edition from 1953. When available, translations of titles of Agnon’s stories are taken from the website of the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature. In the following cases, as no pertinent information could be found on the website of the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature, I use the English titles found in A.J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1968): ‘Chemdat’ (*Etzel Hemdat*), ‘Twofold’ (*Pi Shnayim*), ‘Another Talit’ (*Talit Aheret*) and ‘Our Eyes See’ (*Eineinu Haro’ot*). In three other stories that are not mentioned in Band’s book the translations are by the author of this article: ‘The Man Dressed in Cloth’ (*Ha’ish Lavush Habadim*), ‘Chronicles of our Homes’ (*Korot Bateinu*) and ‘The Night of Yom Kippur’ (*Leylo Shel Yom Hakipurim*).

The title of the original version, 'Between the House and the Courtyard', has left no trace in the Agnonian corpus, given that readers and critics alike unequivocally refer to the story by its later title, 'At the Outset of the Day'.

However, a close study of the abandoned version reveals aspects which, as I will show, have a seminal effect on the interpretation of the story. Despite the structural similarity between the original and later versions of the story, their narratives suggest a divergence in terms of the manner in which the narrator is conceived. In the original version there is an allusion to Agnon's recent book, the focus of which is the 'memory of the souls of bygone days'.² To elucidate this divergence, I offer an in-depth analysis of the two handwritten manuscripts of the story, 'Between the House and the Courtyard' and 'At the Outset of the Day'. Interestingly, the latter version actually bears the original title, which is visibly crossed out and replaced by the new one. The study is based on a synchronic and diachronic reading of Agnon's story. A diachronic analysis of the text in its various versions serves to reveal the title of the text alluded to in the story and its relevance to themes in Agnon's works. A synchronic analysis serves to demonstrate the ways in which the revealed title changes our understanding of this particular story. The comprehensive picture that emerges from the convergence of the synchronic and diachronic readings leads to a clearer understanding of Agnon's perception of his role as a writer.

The plot of the two stories begins after the narrator and his daughter are forced to flee, following a violent attack on their home. They reach the courtyard of the Great Synagogue in the next village. There, the daughter, a symbol of the human soul (a recurrent theme in Agnon's stories), warms her hands over the flame of the memorial candle, while her father is busy talking with her about the manner in which letters join together to make words and prayers. Suddenly, the candle tilts over and the daughter's dress, the very last piece of clothing she has left after their flight, catches fire.

The narrator's attempts to find something with which to warm his daughter become the focus of the plot. We follow the protagonist from his initial rummaging through the Genizah (the storeroom of the synagogue), and through

2. David Segal translates: 'in memory of the souls of days that had departed'. With the exception of this expression, and unless otherwise stated, passages from the story cited in this article are from Segal's English translation: S.Y. Agnon, 'At the Outset of the Day', in *Modern Hebrew Literature*, ed. R. Alter (trans. D. Segal; New York: Behrman House, 1975), p. 224.

his visit to the home of Reb Alter. Although his search comes up empty, his daughter is warmed by her father's gaze and his smile. Together they go and pray in the old school house. There he finds a book he has authored among the books of holy scripture. At that very moment the slumberous soul (the daughter is dozing) becomes *his* garment. The double meaning of the Hebrew word *nit'atfa* (meaning both 'wrapped itself' and 'fainted') is yet another textual manifestation of the many layers of symbolism that characterize the story, in general, and the image of the daughter, in particular.³ The story ends with the pleasant sounds produced by the daughter's humming and mumbling of the prayer, which follows the father's apologetic claim that his telling of the story has neither exaggerated nor enhanced the events.

Most critics and scholars who have studied this story have focused on three main aspects. The first issue concerns the relationship between the story 'At the Outset of the Day' and the stories collected under the title *The Book of Deeds* (*Sefer hama'asim*), as critics attempted to understand why this story was not included in said volume. Baruch Kurzweil led this trend of inquiry. His analysis traces the analogy between this story and Agnon's novel *A Guest for the Night* (*Oreah Natah Lalun*).

The second issue in this story that drew the critics' attention is an intra-narrative one, namely the attempt to unravel the cipher regarding 'need', 'form' and 'will', which Agnon refers to in a – albeit enigmatic – paragraph dedicated entirely (as is the story itself) to the subject of the soul.

I remember one of the sayings, it went approximately like this: 'At times she takes the form of an old woman and at times the form of a little girl. And when she takes the form of a little girl, don't imagine that your soul is as pure as a little girl; this is but an indication that she passionately yearns to recapture the purity of her infancy when she was free of sin. The fool substitutes the *form* for the *need*; the wise man substitutes *will* for *need*.'⁴

The wording of this text reveals its Kabbalistic grounding, which in turn gives the narrative its distinct Agnonian quality. Perhaps it is because of this particular quality that Arnold Band considered this paragraph to be the

3. Segal translates: 'My soul fainted within me, and I stood and prayed as those wrapped in prayer shawls and ritual gowns.' Robert Alter refers to this double meaning in his introduction to the story: *Modern Hebrew Literature*, ed. Alter, p. 217.

4. Agnon, 'At the Outset of the Day', pp. 222–3 (the italics in Segal's translation do not occur in the original Hebrew text).

essence of the entire narrative.⁵ This passage may also vaguely echo a motif in which the book takes control of its reader, in the sense of an inanimate object acquiring a will of its own. This motif can be found also in other stories in the Agnonian corpus, for example in 'The Man Dressed in Cloth' (*Ha'ish lavush habadim*).⁶

The third and most intriguing issue that has captured critics' attention as they analyse 'At the Outset of the Day' has been, and still is, the attempt to reveal which of Agnon's literary or poetic works the narrator alludes to in stating that its intent was to ensure the commemoration of souls of bygone days.

House of Study was full of Jews, the doors of the Ark were open and the Ark was full of old Torah scrolls, and among them gleamed a new book clothed in a red mantle with silver points. This was the Scroll that I had written in memory of the souls of days that had departed. A silver plate hung over the Scroll, with letters engraved upon it, shining letters.⁷

Which book is the narrator-cum-author alluding to? What is the significance of a written work that sets out to commemorate and perpetuate the past? What is the narrator-cum-author's intention in describing the shining light that emanates from the letters engraved on the silver plate? (Agnon's Hebrew originally reads: 'and the letters shone from within them'.) And, most importantly, why does the narrator exclude from the otherwise rich description of this scene the names of the letters and what they spell out, namely the title of his book? These questions constitute the main issue I wish to investigate in this study: that is, the relationship between the purposeful omission of the title of the narrator-cum-author's book and Agnon's self-perception as a writer. Existing analyses of Agnon's literary corpus have yet to address Agnon's poetic perception of his role as a writer. Thus, understanding Agnon's perception of his role and his work adds a new dimension to our reading of the story; at the same time, it emphasizes the link between holy scribal art and secular writing, which is a major theme in Agnon's work.

5. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, p. 359.

6. For an interesting reading of 'The Man Dressed in Cloth' (*Ha'ish lavush habadim*), see A. Lipsker, *Thoughts on Agnon* (in Hebrew; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2015), pp. 59–96.

7. Agnon, 'At the Outset of the Day', p. 224.

The textual analysis methodology

The first step of my analysis is to conduct a comparison among the several versions of the story: by comparing the text that appears in five printed versions and in two handwritten manuscripts I reveal the title of the book that the above-quoted passages allude to. My claim is that this kind of investigative tracing of textual origins may reveal additional, hitherto hidden, meanings. I consider the handwritten manuscript titled 'Between the House and the Courtyard' to be the original version. The version of the story published in *Moznaim* in 1943 matches it very closely. A later handwritten manuscript, titled 'At the Outset of the Day', served as the basis for the versions published in the newspapers *Ha'arets* and *Darom*, and it was that later version that ultimately entered the canon of *Agnon's Complete Works*. A likely explanation for this chain of events was the fact that the publisher of *Agnon's Complete Works* was Schocken, the same company that published *Ha'arets*. Through a comparative analysis of these versions, I am able to establish that the changes introduced in the later version were not merely technical; rather, they illuminate significant aspects of the story itself. At the same time, retracing the original version also reveals the points at which the two versions converge.

The methodology I use for the textual comparison is keyword analysis, the findings of which then serve as the basis for further textual interpretation. In choosing this approach to textual analysis, I rely on a model developed by Hillel Weiss of Bar-Ilan University.⁸ Weiss's idea was to create a digital collection of Agnon's works that would enable their interpretation based on various segments of the texts.⁹ The model itself was initiated in the early 1980s, and it is currently being further developed as part of an ongoing project to construct a digital scientific edition of Agnon's works. This project aims to examine the text and identify its formative components using a comprehensive

8. The findings in this article are the result of my participation in Weiss's project in the years 2009–14, providing a fine example of the benefits this project has for an interpretative study of Agnon.

9. See H. Weiss, 'Analytical Index for the Complete Works of Agnon, A Scholarly Tool in Preparation', *Literary & Linguistic Computing* 4:3 (1989), pp. 169–74. See also H. Weiss, 'A Prototype of a Semi-Automatic Laboratory for Indexing, Classification and Analysis for Texts', *Proceedings of the 12th ALLC Conference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 226–9; H. Weiss and I. Ressler, 'A Dynamic Hypertext in Multimedia Environment for Acquiring Literacy', *The World Association for Educational Research and the School of Education* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1995), vol. 2, pp. 631–42; E. Nissan, H. Weiss and A. Yossef, 'HyperJoseph: The Hyper Textual Organization. Epistemological Considerations', *Knowledge Organization* 23:1 (1996), pp. 16–24.

methodology (explained in detail herein), in order to facilitate the reader's interpretational endeavour as well as the investigator's assessment of each textual component's contribution to the story as a whole. The electronic system, functioning as an artificial intelligence system, provides an organized and comprehensive view of the micro-text and of the macro-text. This allows for an in-depth discussion, based on a computerized comparison of similarities found within a large body of texts – that is, through the recycling and reorganizing of data. In all of these respects, this article can be seen as part of an ongoing trend to bring a textological approach not only to the study of Agnon, but also to the fore of the academic agenda.

The model developed by Weiss employs six key concepts, each of which contributes an additional aspect to the analysis (thematics, poetics, sources, parallelisms, scholarly references, visual references). The model examines these contributions using two complementary analytic axes: a diachronic axis, detailing the occurrence and recurrence of the key concepts in a particular work and in its numerous versions and publications, and a synchronic axis that considers intertextual recurrences of the key concepts, both in the Agnonian corpus and beyond. The digital interface facilitates the gathering of all of the information, and provides both an overall view of the numerous analytical links and a detailed study of each analytical axis.

Insights garnered from the earlier story 'Between the House and the Courtyard'

A comparison of the story's different versions belongs to the diachronic aspect of Weiss's model, examining the evolution of the story as it was being formed. This analysis will provide us with a better understanding of the versions and their points of similarity and divergence. As mentioned, the two analytic axes complete each other and create a cohesive interpretation.

Our story has five printed versions and two handwritten versions. It was published under the title 'Between the House and the Courtyard' in a 1943 issue of *Moznaim* (a version roughly based on the first handwritten manuscript), and then again in 1951 in the newspaper *Ha'aretz* under the title 'At the Outset of the Day'. That version was based on what is apparently the second handwritten manuscript. (Although the handwritten manuscripts are not dated, their chronological order is deduced from the fact that the title

'Between the House and the Courtyard' was crossed out, and replaced with the title 'At the Outset of the Day'; hence the manuscript with the crossed-out title was presumably the earlier version.) The *Ha'aretz* version was published again a year later, in the journal *Darom*; it was the *Ha'aretz* version that was later included in the eleventh volume of the 1952 edition and in the seventh volume of the 1953 edition of *Agnon's Complete Works*.¹⁰

The earlier manuscript bearing the title 'Between the House and the Courtyard' (ARC 40 1888) consists of 26 pages sized 8°, on paper of different kinds. The story is written in pen, with many corrections, erasures and additions in pencil. On the reverse side of some of the pages we find crossed-out drafts from the novel *The Bridal Canopy* (*Hahnasat Kalah*) and from the story 'Ido and Inam' (*Ido ve-Inam*). The later manuscript, with the new title (ARC 40 1880), consists of 22 pages sized 8°. This version too is written in pen, with corrections, erasures and additions in pen and pencil. The two manuscripts were entrusted to the Agnon Archive in May 2010 by Nathan Wilhelm of Sweden.¹¹

A careful study of the different versions of our story shows the uniqueness of the *Moznaim* version, which at certain points seems to reflect the earlier manuscript like a broken mirror. This version is the only one in which the affinity between the character of the daughter and the notion of the soul is neglected, omitting the metaphoric phrase 'my daughter, daughter of my soul'.¹² This version even omits the word 'daughter', or 'little daughter', saying instead 'my girl', which conveys a different kind of affinity.

A further aspect that singles out the *Moznaim* version from the others has to do with the telos of the text. Although the story, in all its versions, deals with the question of the destiny of the Jewish people, in the *Moznaim* version there is a special emphasis on the vigour of bygone days, both on a personal and on a national level. On the personal level, the distant past which the narrator recalls are the 'bygone days' of his childhood, when he

10. The following are the five versions of the story: 'Between the House and the Courtyard', *Moznaim* 16:1 (1943), pp. 12–15 (in Hebrew); 'At the Outset of the Day', *Ha'aretz*, 30 September 1951, p. 5 (in Hebrew); 'At the Outset of the Day', *Darom* 15:8 (1952), pp. 110–12 (in Hebrew); 'At the Outset of the Day', in *Agnon's Complete Works* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Schocken, 1952), vol. 11, pp. 171–7; 'At the Outset of the Day', *Agnon's Complete Works* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Schocken, 1953), vol. 7, pp. 171–7.

11. I would like to thank the Agnon Archive in the National Library of Israel and Raphi Weiser, former head of the archive, who guided me in my search for the manuscripts.

12. This phrase is lost, in fact, in Segal's English translation, which reads 'my dearest daughter', 'my darling' or 'my daughter, the darling of my heart' (see Agnon, 'At the Outset of the Day', pp. 219, 224).

used to rummage through the scrolls in the Genizah. However, the narrator consciously chooses to focus on the recent past as well, which in fact becomes the driving force of the plot. Indeed, the recent and the distant past, as well as the personal and the national past, are welded together in the narrator's words, as he recalls the destruction of his own house – 'we left our house in haste',¹³ echoing the Israelites' hastened exodus from Egypt, as part of the collective distant past. Both in the omission of the metaphoric reference to the daughter and in the characterization of bygone days, there is an emphasis on the narrator's close affinity to both the personal and the national past.

**'It was the book that I had written':
discovering the omitted title**

Let us now shift our attention to the comparative chart (TABLE 1). Its focus is on additions and omissions, spelling variations and alterations of word order and punctuation in the few sentences that describe the book which the narrator spotted among the holy texts in the Genizah.

The alteration of one particular sentence in the text guides our attention towards Agnon's perception of the narrator-cum-author. As we can see in the later manuscript 'At the Outset of the Day' (as well as in the *Ha'aretz* version and the two that followed), the narrator's description of his own book ends stating that the engraved letters 'shone from within them'. The words 'engraved letters' evoke a familiar motif, alluding to the revelation on Mount Sinai. This is a recurrent motif in Agnon's works: it is found, for example, in the compilation of *Book, Writer and Story* (*Sefer, sofer ve-sipur*) and in the novella *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* (*Ve-haya he-akov le-mishor*), where the description is of letters engraved on gravestones. In our present context, however, the power of these engraved letters is neither mystical nor liturgical, but rather straightforwardly realistic. It is this power that enables the narrator to recognize the letters even from a distance: 'And even though I stood far off I saw what they were.'¹⁴ However, given the implication that the narrator clearly recognized the letters, his seemingly offhanded omission (in the later versions) of the title they form denotes a deliberate effort to elude the reader and perhaps even to obscure the content

13. Agnon, *Moznaim*, p. 12.

14. Agnon, 'At the Outset of the Day', p. 224.

TABLE I A comparison of the various versions of the story¹⁵

'Between the House and the Courtyard' – manuscript	'At the Outset of the Day' – manuscript	<i>Moznaim</i> 1943	<i>Ha'aretz</i> 1951	<i>Darom</i> 1952	<i>Agnon's Complete Works I</i> , 1952; <i>Agnon's Complete Works II</i> , 1953
זה הספר שכתבתי אני וציץ כסף תלוי עליו, ועל הציץ חקוק היה שתי תיבות אלו ימים נוראים,	זה הספר שכתבתי אני לעילוי נשמת ימים שעברו, וציץ כסף תלוי היה עליו ועל הציץ אותיות חקוקות והאותיות האירו מתוכן,	זה הספר שכתבתי אני. וציץ כסף תלוי עליו, ועל הציץ חקוק באותיות זהב ימים נוראים,	זה הספר שכתבתי אני לעילוי נשמת ימים שעברו, וציץ כסף תלוי היה עליו ועל הציץ אותיות חקוקות והאותיות האירו מתוכן,	Same as previous version	Same as previous version
This was the book that I had written and on it hung a silver plate and on the plate were engraved these two words Yamim Noraim (Days of Awe),	This was the book that I had written to commemorate* souls of bygone days, and on it there hung a silver plate, and the plate was engraved with letters, and the letters shone from within them,	This was the book that I had written. And on it hung a silver plate and engraved on the plate in golden letters was Yamim Noraim (Days of Awe),	This was the book that I had written to commemorate* souls of bygone days, and on it there hung a silver plate, and on the plate letters were engraved, and the letters shone from within them,		
	*literally: to ensure the ascent from this world to the next of souls		*literally: to ensure the ascent from this world to the next of souls		

15. The quotations included in the table were translated by the author. The entry 'Same as previous version' applies to all of the aspects of comparison.

of what he has seen. What are the letters that shine from within, and what words do they form? In other words, what is the name of the book which the narrator proudly declares he himself has written?

A look at the earlier manuscript, along with the *Moznaim* version that follows it, reveals the missing element. In these two versions we are told that the words on the book that drew the narrator's attention were 'Days of Awe' (*Yamim Noraim*). However, in the earlier handwritten manuscript the description of the revealed title focuses on the content of the title, emphasizing that there are two 'written words' (*tevot*). By contrast, in the *Moznaim* version the description of the revealed title emphasizes the design and material elements, the 'gold letters'. In other words, in both versions Agnon addresses the question of 'what' is written on the plate; however, in the *Moznaim* version attention is drawn to the title's ornate appearance. A further addition found only in the *Moznaim* version is the inclusion of the words 'designating this book to be read on Rosh Hashana and on Yom Kippur'.¹⁶ Thus, given these unique features in this version of the text, it seems unfortunate that it has been excluded from Agnon's canonical works and has been relegated instead to the depths of the Agnon archive.

Interpreting the story with and without the allusion to Agnon's book *Days of Awe*

Some critics have noted that the presence of the 'book within a book' suggests the use of a poetic device, such as *mise en abîme*, which in turn implies a parallel between the book that the narrator-cum-author identifies among the holy scriptures and the book in the reader's hands, Ya'akov Bahat analysed this story as it relates to the stories in Agnon's *The Book of Deeds* and determined that the uniqueness of 'At the Outset of the Day' is that it ends by hinting at the prospect of redemption. A book that bridges between past and future offers an optimal path to redemption, a redemption that projects back onto the entire story from the beginning of the narrative. This pattern, however, has nothing in common with the stories in *The Book of Deeds*. Noting that

16. Agnon, *Moznaim*, p. 15. It is well known that Agnon did in fact publish a book titled *Days of Awe*, which was intended to be read in between prayers, during the period starting on Rosh Hashana and ending after Yom Kippur, a period that Jews refer to as 'days of awe'.

Agnon chose to use the words ‘a new book’,¹⁷ and not ‘a new edition of scripture’, led Bahat to conclude that the book discovered by the narrator is none other than the book that is concurrently in the hands of the reader, namely ‘At the Outset of the Day’.¹⁸ In contrast to Bahat’s analysis, Rena Lee’s interpretation clearly demonstrates that she understands that the book mentioned in the story refers to the holy scripture of the Torah, written by the narrator-cum-author.¹⁹

The common thread that unites these interpretations is the presence of the poetic device. Whether we accept Rena Lee’s interpretation of the ‘book within the story’ as a Torah scroll copied by the narrator-cum-author (or cum-scribe), or if we rely on the title revealed in the earlier versions of the story and consequently identify the ‘book within the story’ as Agnon’s *Days of Awe*, there is an implicit parallel drawn between sacred script and secular literature. In other words, Agnon’s use of the poetic device here serves to underscore the sacred nature of writing.

Yitzhak Barzilay,²⁰ Edna Aphek²¹ and Yaniv Hagbi²² viewed the mysterious book with the omitted title as a symbol of the Jewish past, which Agnon’s writings attempt to revive. Baruch Kurzweil and, later, Rachel Ofer²³ are the only critics who have considered Agnon’s book *Days of Awe* when interpreting the story ‘At the Outset of the Day’, yet they did not reach a definitive conclusion as to the identity of the book mentioned in the latter. In fact, in his essay ‘A Generation with No Clothing and No Books’,²⁴ Kurzweil makes no mention of this question at all. In a later publication, however, Kurzweil draws an analogy between the passage describing the luminescence of the mysterious book in ‘At the Outset of the Day’ and the ‘commemorative book’, mentioned in Agnon’s preface to the second edition of *Days of Awe*, as follows:

17. Agnon, ‘At the Outset of the Day’, p. 224.

18. Y. Bahat, ‘At the Outset of the Day by S.Y. Agnon’, *Ha’hinukh* 39 (1967), pp. 3–4, 121–7 (in Hebrew).

19. R. Lee, ‘Further Study on the Story “At the Outset of the Day” by S.Y. Agnon’, *Hadoar* 55:15 (13 February 1976), pp. 228–9 (in Hebrew).

20. Y. Barzilay, ‘Dressing the Naked Soul’, *Hadoar* 53:39 (13 September 1974), p. 657 (in Hebrew).

21. E. Aphek, ‘The Relationship between Content and Language’, *Aley Siakh* 25 (1988), pp. 159–62 (in Hebrew).

22. Y. Hagbi, *Language, Absence, Play* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Carmel, 2007), p. 298.

23. R. Ofer, ‘At the Outset of the Day: Days of Awe and Repentance in Agnon’s works’, *Teshuva Upsychologia*, 2001, pp. 67–76 (in Hebrew).

24. B. Kurzweil, ‘A Generation with No Clothing and No Books’, *Ha’aretz*, 9 January 1953, p. 5 (in Hebrew).

It is the book of the narrator that gleams among the holy scrolls this time, as it becomes part of the radiance, through which the child, 'aged seven or eight', discovered the wondrous unity of the ideal Yom Kippur.

And now, ... on 'the occasion of the publishing of a new edition' of what its author referred to as 'a commemorative book', that is, in [the book] *Days of Awe*, in the author's new preface, written in 1946, the final curtain is raised, so to speak, and we are allowed a glimpse into the great depths of [Agnon's] entire artistic endeavour.²⁵

Kurzweil applauds Agnon's rare artistic achievement in this preface, and concludes his discussion with the following words: 'It is no coincidence that [among all of the Hebrew authors] it was Agnon who dedicated years of labour to this great book, *Days of Awe*.'²⁶

The role of the author according to Agnon

Agnon's perception of the sacred nature of writing extends also to his own role as a writer and compiler of Jewish texts. As Kurzweil mentions, Agnon introduces his perception of this role in his preface to the second edition of *Days of Awe*, where he refers to it as 'a commemorative book'. In the previous section of the current study, Agnon's suggestion of a parallel between sacred scripts and secular literature was introduced via the use of the poetic device of the 'book within the story'. However, taking into account the earlier versions of the story, in which the 'book within the story' is identified as the author's (or, in his case, author-cum-narrator's) book *Days of Awe*, reveals yet another dimension of Agnon's perception, namely the cultural role of the author.

The significance of Agnon's perception of his role can be found not only in two of the earlier versions of our story, but also as a recurring theme throughout much of his oeuvre. To demonstrate this, a synchronic analysis – using Weiss's model – is warranted. The examples presented herein emphasize Agnon's allusions to Mishnaic and Talmudic sources within the poetic construct of his literary works. The image of the narrator as created by Agnon conveys the intensity of the association between Rabbinical literature and literary works.

25. B. Kurzweil, 'The Experience of Yom Kippur in Agnon's Works', in *Essays on S.Y. Agnon's Stories* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Schocken, 1970), p. 277.

26. Kurzweil, *Essays on S.Y. Agnon's Stories*, p. 282.

(a) The narrator, persecuted and forced to flee from his home, seeks strengthening (*chizuk*) for himself and for his daughter. The request for strengthening is presented in the story as a real necessity. At this point, turning our attention to intertextual references pertaining to the category of Jewish sources, we note that in the Babylonian Talmud the tractate *Berachot* states the following: ‘Four things need strengthening (*chizuk*): Torah and good deeds, prayer and good behaviour (*derech eretz*).’²⁷ These four elements that the Talmud claims need strengthening are also sub-themes in Agnon’s story. Furthermore, examining intertextual references from other works by Agnon reveals parallel instances that highlight the basic human need for strengthening. However, this daily need is altered when the timing coincides with Yom Kippur. The text in Agnon’s story ‘Our Eyes See’ (*Eineinu Haro’ot*) clarifies this difference: ‘All other days, a man’s soul needs strengthening, while on Yom Kippur holiness is maintained through the very essence of the day itself – any place one stands in is holy.’²⁸ Yet the narrator in ‘At the Outset of the Day’ is indeed in need of strengthening, thus compelling the scholar–reader to reframe the narrator’s character in light of these observations.

(b) Immediately after this call for strengthening, the narrator describes how he glances at his daughter. This act too is significant, both as a poetic phenomenon within this particular story and in terms of the textual sources on which it draws.

I glanced at her, at my little girl standing all atremble by the memorial candle in the courtyard, warming her little hands over the flame. Growing aware of my eyes, she looked at me – a frightened child, finding her father standing behind her, and sensing that his thoughts were muddled and his heart humbled.²⁹

On the poetic level, and considering the psychological construct of the characters in this story, a glance can possibly be said to be a forbidden act. The father glances at his daughter once again near the end of the story, though in a notably different sense. On the occasion of the first significant glance, he sees her warming her hands over the burning candle, and she in turn glances back, whereas near the end of the story the father sees her

27. *bBer.* 32b.

28. S.Y. Agnon, *Of Such and Of Such* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Schocken, 1953), p. 477 (translated by the author of this article).

29. Agnon, ‘At the Outset of the Day’, p. 219.

naked, and her sight evokes 'an affectionate laughter' ('a loving smile' in Segal's translation) on his lips.³⁰ The first glance, then, seems like a fatherly, neutral glance, while the second one suggests the glance of a man, bearing an erotic overtone. Once again, an examination of intertextual allusions to Jewish sources facilitates the interpretive task. A well-known passage in the Tosefta, tractate *Hagiga*, reads: 'Four entered the orchard (*pardes*), Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma, Aher and Rabbi Akiva. One glanced and died; one glanced and was hurt; one glanced and cut off the saplings; and one ascended safely and descended safely.'³¹ Hence, due to these intertextual allusions, the repeated use of the verb 'glanced' (in Hebrew) evokes a sense of danger.

(c) The character of Reb Alter, the mohel from Buczacz, appears in several of Agnon's works: in the novel *Yesteryear* (*Tmol shilshom*) and in two of his stories, 'Within the Wall' (*Lifnim min ha-homah*) and 'Chronicles of Our Homes' (*Korot bateinu*). We also find Reb Alter teaching in 'In the Heart of the Seas' (*Bi-lvav yamim*). For our purposes, let us note that Reb Alter's home in 'At the Outset of the Day' is said to be 'built [*mevuneh*] on one of the low hills surrounding the Great Synagogue'. However, given that in the version 'Between the House and the Courtyard' the form of the word 'built' is different from that used in Modern Hebrew, we are again compelled to consider intertextual allusions to Jewish sources. The word as it appears in Agnon's story is found in the Talmud, in a passage about the location of the city Hebron.³² The purposeful use of the Talmudic version of this word in this version of the story is yet another example of the link Agnon implies between holy scripture and artistic writing (reminding us of the two meanings of the Hebrew word *sofer*). Hebron serves as a symbol of this very link. It should be noted, however, that in the *Moznaim* version of the story the word *omed* ('standing') is used instead of *mevuneh* ('built'), which again leads us to question the motive behind Agnon's omission. Furthermore, an examination of parallel occurrences of the term 'built house' in Agnon's works reveals that in four of the five instances that this combination is mentioned – in the stories 'To this Day', 'At the Outset of the Day' and 'The Sign' (*Hasiman*),

30. *Ibid.*, p. 224. The combination of laughter, on the one hand, and love, on the other, provides a tone of double meaning.

31. *tHag.* 2:3. The same incident is recalled in the Babylonian Talmud, in *bHag.* 14b.

32. *bSotah* 34b.

as in the passage cited above – the context refers to the sacred soil of the Land of Israel.

As these examples reveal, in Agnon's works the two literatures – the Rabbinical and the secular – are as if melded into one, and it is up to Agnon's readers to identify the Rabbinical sources and decipher their contribution to the literary work. Thus Agnon creates a secular literature capable of preserving – indeed immortalizing – the Jewish tradition.

Agnon's perception of *author* and *scribe*

Relevant to this discussion are Agnon's other references to the writing of the Torah. There are two references – in addition to the current story – where this is mentioned: once in a non-literary context in Agnon's compilation titled *Book, Writer and Story*, where he reflects on the perspective of another prominent writer, and once in the short story 'Tehilla', where it is mentioned by the narrator, who also in the context of that story is an author. In the former, non-literary example, Agnon refers to Maimonides' description of the act of writing.

In the Torah scroll which I wrote, the width of each column was four thumb-breadths [with the exception of the] columns on which the Song of the Red Sea and the song *Ha'azinu* were written; they were six thumb-breadths wide. There were 51 lines in each column and 226 columns in the entire scroll. [In its entirety,] the scroll was approximately 1,366 thumb-breadths long.³³

Although this is not a literary text, the style of the passage appears to emphasize the writer's sense of the importance of the act of writing (transcribing), and the satisfaction that the writer draws from having created an artefact that meets the meticulous criteria of scribal art. It may be interesting to note the recurring use of the conjunction *and* (the letter *vav* in Hebrew), such that each sentence that ends with a full point is followed by another that begins with the conjunction. This stylistic element evokes a feeling of consistent continuity. This is complemented by a detailed and precise description, which echoes the writer's personal experience of the act of writing.

33. S.Y. Agnon, *Book, Writer and Story* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Schocken, 1978), p. 97. Agnon is quoting here from Rambam's *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Sefer Torah*, ch. 9, Halakhah 10: www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/925431/jewish/Tefillin-Mezuzah-and-Sefer-Torah-Chapter-Nine.htm; accessed 23 June 2017.

The second example that mentions Torah writing and the art of the scribe is a literary text in which Agnon reveals his own attitude towards this art. In one of the dialogues in 'Tehilla', the female protagonist appeals to the witness–narrator to help her write a letter. Her description of the favour she is requesting reflects an underlying link between holy scribal art and secular writing. Whereas in the former reference, which was framed in a non-literary context, Agnon emphasizes the process of writing, in the current reference the emphasis is on the product and especially on the praise his work has garnered. In response to the protagonist's request that the text be written using the letter forms found in the Torah, the narrator brags that back in his youth he had already transcribed a Torah scroll and hence he is proficient at this skill. Moreover, everyone who saw it had commented on its high quality.

The analogy between the art of the scribe (*sofer stam*) and secular writing brings us back to the question concerning the nature of the book mentioned in 'At the Outset of the Day', which the narrator tells us he has written. According to Hillel Barzel, not only was it the work of the narrator-cum-author, but at the same time it also hints at the 'proximity Agnon sees between a Torah book and the book of an excellent writer'.³⁴ Shay Pnueli, preceding Bahat and Barzel, went another step further and suggested that all of Agnon's works are in fact a commemoration of the souls of bygone days.³⁵

Kurzweil's comment in his above-mentioned essay implicitly compares Agnon's project of compiling Jewish texts with Bialik's compilation endeavour,³⁶ which was motivated by the desire to rescue the national and spiritual assets of the Jewish people. In Agnon's works, the recurrent motif of books plays a similar commemorative role.³⁷ Indeed, the culmination of Agnon's repeated references to Jewish writings, a theme that links many of Agnon's works, is his non-literary anthology titled *Days of Awe*, which he collected and edited. It might seem that the book motif in our story is not very prominent, as it emerges only through the mention of the Genizah and the implied theme of burning and saving from a fire (manifested in this case in the daughter's dress).³⁸ However, discovering the title of the book that Agnon omitted in the later versions of the story sheds light on the

34. Cited in H. Barzel, 'Agnon's Poetics', *Bisde Hemed*, February–March 1971, p. 267 (in Hebrew).

35. S. Pnueli, 'At the Outset of the Day', *Al Hamishmar*, 9 October 1959, pp. 5–6 (in Hebrew).

36. Kurzweil, 'A Generation with No Clothing and No Books', p. 5.

37. Kurzweil, *Essays on S.Y. Agnon's Stories*, p. 177; and see Kurzweil on the following page as well.

38. These motifs are relevant to the various diasporas of the Jewish culture: M. Choen, 'Disaster

seminal significance of the theme of books in this particular story as related to memory and commemoration.

The link between the holy scriptures and Agnon's writings, shown both in Agnon's works in general and in this particular story, is substantiated by the various instances in which we find Agnon referring to the role of the scribe. In numerous places in his fictional and non-fictional texts, Agnon refers to the double meaning of the Hebrew word *sofer* (both 'author' and 'scribe'), thus reinforcing the aforementioned parallel between holy scripture and artistic writing. This link is underscored by the title of one of the chapters in Ariel Hirschfeld's book *Reading S.J. Agnon: 'Between Holy Scribe and Simple Author'* (*Bein sofer stam listam sofer*). In Hebrew, the inversion of the order of the words creates a wordplay based on the two meanings of the word *stam*. In the first part of the title, *stam* is the phonetic expression of the acronym formed by the letters S-T-M, which stand for *Sifrei Torah* ('Torah scrolls'), *Tefillin* ('Phylacteries') and *Mezuzot* ('Mezuzahs'); hence a *sofer stam* is a scribe of holy texts. In the second part of the title of Hirschfeld's chapter, *stam* means 'simple', as opposed to 'holy'. This wordplay sums up Hirschfeld's notion of the mission Agnon would have had in mind for himself. Hirschfeld claims that for Agnon, '[l]iterature belongs alongside the Jewish holy scriptures and within the most binding context of tradition'.³⁹

This link between holy scripture and secular literature implies an additional link, namely that between art and faith.⁴⁰ The latter link is related to the thesis proposed in the current study. Thus, we find ample expression of Agnon's yearning to have his works placed in synagogues alongside the holy scriptures, both in his general poetic outlook and in the particular insight garnered by comparing the various versions of this story. There are several instances in which Agnon voices his desire to enter the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and sing there with his Levite brethren.

In a dream, in a vision of the night, I saw myself standing with my brother-Levites in the Holy Temple, singing with them the songs of David, King of Israel, melodies such as no ear has heard since the day our city was destroyed and its people went into exile. I suspect that the angels in charge of the Shrine

and Change in an Ottoman Sephardic Community: Moses Montefiore and the Monastair Fire of 1863', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 55:1 (2004), pp. 131–56.

39. A. Hirschfeld, *Reading S.Y. Agnon* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Achuzat-Bait, 2011), p. 86.

40. Note the phonetic resemblance between the two words in Hebrew – *omanut* ('art') and *emuna* ('faith'), both stemming from the root אָמַן.

of Music, fearful lest I sing in wakefulness what I had sung in dream, made me forget by day what I had sung at night; for if my brethren, the sons of my people, were to hear, they would be unable to bear their grief over the happiness they have lost. To console me for having prevented me from singing with my mouth, they enable me to compose songs in writing.⁴¹

In other words, Agnon accepts the inevitable need to suppress his ambition to *sing* in the Holy Temple, and asks instead that his works find a place in the synagogue; this while his popularity as a Jewish writer is increasing. In fact, Agnon's wish came true with the publication of *Days of Awe* in 1939, which indeed found its place among the holy scriptures in the synagogues. In his preface to the book's second edition, published in 1946, Agnon mentions his aspirations when writing the book and his desire to have it disseminated in the synagogues.

Some men of knowledge are never distracted from the eminence of the holiday, not even for a single hour, but what is the layman to do, who does not always have the strength to maintain the same level of virtue experienced as he stands and communes with his creator... As I was contemplating this, it occurred to me to write a ballad celebrating the devotion of the Days of Awe, so that one could read this book during intermissions – that is, between the prayers ... an intermediary book, if you will, for reading in between the prayers ... And thank God, [this] essay has been granted the honour of being accepted by most communities of the Jewish Diaspora, and many study it in synagogues and in study halls, on Rosh Hashana and on Yom Kippur.⁴²

As mentioned, Agnon yearned to have his literary works placed alongside the holy scriptures in the synagogues. Although to date there has been no evidence of this aspiration in Agnon's literary works, one can clearly see it in this earlier manuscript and in the version printed in *Moznaim*, in which the title of the book mentioned in 'At the Outset of the Day' is specified. Discovering the book's title sheds light on Agnon's perception of himself,

41. Agnon's speech at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm, 10 December 1966. The English translation has been taken from the official website of the Nobel Prize: www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1966/agnon-speech.html; accessed 23 June 2017. See also in the non-fictional book of S.Y. Agnon, *From Myself to Myself* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Schocken, 1976), pp. 87–90. Agnon's Nobel speech was first published in *Ha'aretz*, 11 December 1966.

42. S.Y. Agnon, *Days of Awe* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Schocken, 1998), p. 8. This is my translation, as it appears that a translation of Agnon's preface to the second edition was not included in the English publication. The experience of Yom Kippur is an important theme in Agnon's literary works. Examples include the stories 'Chemdat' (*Etzel hemdat*), 'Twofold' (*Pi shnayim*), 'Another Talit' (*Talit aheret*) and the second chapter in Agnon's novel *A Guest for the Night*, 'The Night of Yom Kippur' (*Leylo shel yom hakipurim*). For the polarity in rendering Yom Kippur in Agnon's works, see S. Nash, 'Two Poles of the Yom Kippur Experience in Agnon', *Prooftexts* 11:3 (1991), pp. 297–302.

both as a writer and as a cultural influence within the community of his readers. It seems, then, that by the year 1943 (only a short time after the first publication of *Days of Awe* in 1938 and three years before its second edition) Agnon already saw himself as a writer who had secured the eternal commemoration of souls of bygone days, an act which granted his works a place in the pantheon of Jewish holy scriptures. However, Agnon's decision to omit the words 'days of awe' from the later versions of the story effectively turned the book's title into a riddle, evoking different interpretative readings. Here, however, the author's original intent, pre-dating the riddle, has been revealed.

At this stage of the study our task is not yet complete. The next inevitable step is to try to explain this omission, taking into account both the course of the story and the motif of writing in Agnon's works in general.⁴³ One possible explanation is that Agnon was not entirely comfortable disclosing this aspiration, namely that the fame and status of his book should be equated with those of the holy scriptures. Perhaps the wish to refrain from revealing this deep aspiration was related also to the sensitive timing of the publication of this literary text in the *Ha'aretz* version (on which the canonical version is based), namely between the first and second editions of *Days of Awe*. Certainly Agnon's propensity for alteration and erasure warrants further study. Although we can only surmise what were Agnon's reasons for omitting the title of 'the book that [he] had written', this omission has undoubtedly created a mystery, the desired solution of which has motivated multiple interpretations and consequently enriched our literary experience of reading this story.

This study has offered a comparative analysis of an Agnonian text, with the purpose of unravelling an enigmatic motif in Agnon's story 'At the Outset of the Day' in its different versions. Going back to the early manuscript of this story has been instrumental both for solving the enigma and for examining its significance in terms of Agnon's self-perception as a writer. In addition to revealing a new interpretation, the analysis presented has also demonstrated the significant advantage of employing a methodology that incorporates both a synchronic and a diachronic reading of Agnon's works.

43. For a discussion of the theme of writing in Agnon's works, see M. Arbel, *Written on the Dog's Skin – S.Y. Agnon: Concepts of Creativity and Art* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Keter; Beer Sheva: Heksherim Center, 2006).