

A Simple Story

Szybusz and the Crisis of Parenting

MICHAL ARBELL

Tel Aviv University

This paper takes its starting point from Alan Mintz's depiction of the connections between parenthood, arranged marriage, and moral values in a time of historical transition in S. Y. Agnon's late story, "In a Single Moment." In what follows, the author explores similar themes in Agnon's famous earlier novel, A Simple Story, which portrays the inevitable connection between the abolishment of moral order in Szybusz at the beginning of the twentieth century and the failure of parenthood, both on the level of the family and in the town as a whole. In the Hurvitz family, the moral and parental failure culminates in the arranged marriage and the eventual mental breakdown of the young protagonist Hirshl. The author suggests that the therapy that Hirshl undergoes at Dr. Langsam's sanatorium, which attracted much critical attention, serves to reestablish positive parenthood by reenacting the process of rearing a child from babyhood to adolescence, as well as by evoking the historical memory of moral order.

ARRANGED MARRIAGES AND MORAL VALUES: "IN A SINGLE MOMENT" AND *A SIMPLE STORY*

In the final chapter of his last book, *Ancestral Tales*, Alan Mintz offers a brilliant interpretation of Agnon's story "Besha 'ah aḥat" ("In a Single Moment"). With great sensitivity to the smallest detail and nuance, Mintz interprets the loving relationship and dynamics between Avraham David and Sarah Rachel and their only son, Menaḥem, and portrays the family drama in the context of the historical decline of the old moral order of the Torah in Buczacz in the second half of the nineteenth

century. Menaḥem, a gifted *talmid ḥacham*, is the only surviving child of Sarah and Avraham David. Although he has reached the ripe age of fifteen, Menaḥem is not married yet. According to the custom, his parents should have betrothed him two years earlier, when he became a bar mitzvah. Mintz suggests that the parents failed to execute their duty to their son because they unconsciously resisted the thought of parting from him, their only child, but then he adds another, stronger, interpretation: The source of the problem lies not in the emotional dynamics of a specific family, but in the historical time of the Austrian rule of the city, when “Buczacz has become complacent, and the force of God’s word [...] has been blunted and obscured beneath a mesh of protocols based on social status.”⁷¹ The world of the Torah is declining; there are fewer accomplished young scholars, and Menaḥem’s value in the matchmaking market, which still offers *talmidei ḥakhamim* to the rich fathers of young daughters, is soaring. Dazzled by the high prospects of their promising son, Avraham David and Sarah cannot make up their minds about the right match.

Menaḥem’s marriage predicament is resolved in a single moment. While walking together through the city, father and son encounter a dramatic scene. A young bride is abandoned under the *ḥuppah*, just before the wedding ceremony is about to begin, by her prospective groom. The girl comes from a known Buczacz family. She is the daughter of a highly respected (although poor) scholar and the granddaughter of a famously righteous woman who dedicated her life to assisting in the marrying off of penniless young girls. The groom, on the other hand, is a newcomer, an older widower who bought some property in the city. The fire that devastated Buczacz in 1865 enabled strangers like him to purchase real estate at very low prices. The bride’s father has promised the groom a dowry of a certain amount, but he does not manage to get together the money by the time of the wedding. The groom refuses to accept his future father-in-law’s word to make good on the promise as soon as he comes to funds and leaves the wedding place. The shocked, abandoned young bride faints and lies on the ground of the synagogue courtyard. In the spur of the moment, Avraham David asks his son to marry the girl, and Menaḥem accepts. A huge outburst of joy unites the city: Avraham David and Menaḥem ignore the latter’s prospects of affluence in order to do the right thing. Mintz observes that Avraham David’s decision “is fueled by another unacknowledged source: a desire to

overcome his own unimportance.” Nevertheless, Avraham David is also driven by a strong moral impulse: “Rescuing the girl is tantamount to rescuing Buczacz from the threats that have beset it.”² For one glorious moment, this generous and compassionate act restores the moral order in the city. Mintz stresses: “It is a moment of redemption, not Redemption itself.”³ Unlike in older times, when Buczacz “was united in reverence for its magisterial spiritual leader and obeisant to his will,” after the partitions of Poland, “that capacity for inner reform seems exhausted,” and a lasting redemption is no longer a viable option for the community.⁴

A similar constellation of a mother, a father, and their single son caught in the drama of an arranged marriage lies at the center of Agnon’s highly praised and probably most popular novel, *Sippur pashut* (*A Simple Story*). Agnon published the novel in 1935, twenty years before “In a Single Moment,” but the story is set almost forty years later than “In a Single Moment,” at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵ By that time, applying Mintz’s observation about the portrayal of Buczacz in *A City in its Fullness*, the city (called Szybusz in the novel), certainly had “become wholly unmoored from its connection to Torah” and had reached a state of “moral debasement.”⁶ In “In a Single Moment,” the father—with the later approval of the mother—asks his son to value kindness, compassion, and moral duty over money and marry the poor abandoned girl; it is the right thing to do. In marked contrast, in *A Simple Story*, Tsirl, the mother of the young protagonist, Hirshl, with the pleased approval of his father, Boruch Meir, manipulates her son to betray the bond of love between him and Blume, his poor orphaned relative, in order to marry a rich man’s daughter. In Tsirl’s eyes, this is the right thing to do. It is not merely that money outranks moral values; for Tsirl, and, as it seems, for her social milieu as a whole, *there are no values except money*. Because Tsirl is a very clever woman (as the narrator keeps telling us) who exercises great power over her son, and because Hirshl, like his father, typically follows his mother’s lead, he is manipulated to abandon Blume, whom he loves deeply and who had put her trust in him. He becomes the man, like the erstwhile groom in “In a Single Moment,” who cruelly abandons his betrothed because her father does not have enough money.

Agnon’s interest in the emotional and ethical aspects of matchmaking spans five decades of writing. In the first story he published after immigrating to Erets Yisra’el, “Agunot” (1908), from which he took his own name, Agnon, he describes

the catastrophic consequences of an arranged marriage that ends in divorce. The mismatch goes beyond personal suffering to symbolize a national and even cosmic eternal state of *'aginut*, of loss and separation, longing and alienation. In his novella, *Bidmi yamehah* (*In the Prime of her Life*, 1923), he deals with the confused ethics of arranged marriages, when the good intention of a father to protect his daughter from her heart disease condemns her to a sorrowful life of heartbreak. In those stories, as well as in *A Simple Story* (1935) and the later story "Tehillah" (1950), Agnon rewrites—albeit in a much more sophisticated way—the popular theme of the wrongs of arranged marriages in earlier modern Hebrew literature. The literature of the Jewish Enlightenment harshly criticized the practice of the *shidukh*. In his autobiography, *Hat'ot ne'urim* (*The Sins of Youth*, 1878), Moshe Leib Lilienblum powerfully portrays the devastating effects of his arranged marriage at a young age, which prevented him from having a love life as well as achieving higher education. Similar descriptions also appear in earlier Jewish autobiographies like *Avi'ezer* by Mordechai Aharon Ginzburg (1863). Negative representations of arranged marriages or the attempts to arrange them also appear in the first portrayals of contemporary society in modern Hebrew fiction, in Y. L. Gordon's long short story "Aḥarit simḥah tugah" ("Rejoicing Ends in Grief," 1868) and the debut novel *Avot uvanim* (*Fathers and Sons*, 1868) by S. Y. Abramovitsh (Mendele Mocher Seforim).⁷ These works, like many others that follow them, including Abramowitch's masterpiece Yiddish novel *Fishke der krumer* (*Fishke the Lame*, 1869), describe the traditional *shidukh* as a backwards and obsolete practice that oppresses the erotic life of the Jews and goes against both nature and reason.⁸ The personal and social wrongs created by arranged marriages also stand at the center of relatively later modern Hebrew works like Abramowitch's novel *Be'emeq habakhah* (*In the Valley of Tears*, 1909) or M. Y. Berdyczewski's "Qlonimos veNa'omi" ("Klonimos and Naomi," 1909).⁹

Agnon's literary portrayals of arranged marriages are much more complex and multifaceted than those of the Hebrew Haskalah. It is important to note that the traditional *shidukh*, as well as the Jewish Enlightenment's agenda to eradicate it, are not a part of Agnon's social world. Still, the abovementioned works by Agnon do all point out the heartbreak, suffering, and even disasters caused by arranged marriages. Regarding the ethics of *shidukh*, two works stand out: "In a Single Moment" and *A Simple Story*. Agnon's "In a Single Moment" portrays, in an unprecedented way,

the abrupt decision of a father to marry his son to a girl whom they both do not know, as an altogether positive act. The story suggests that, because of the goodness invested in the father's decision, the couple had a very happy and fruitful marriage. "In a Single Moment" is far from being a sentimental or even forgiving portrayal of Buczacz, but, in a way, this late story implies that, if a man like Avraham David is, in a single moment, totally true to the old moral values, even the much vilified traditional practice of *shidukh* can become a source of momentary redemption. The ethical dynamics in *A Simple Story* are almost the opposite. When the old values are totally abandoned, the use of the traditional *shidukh* has no justification; its wrongs cannot be mitigated on the basis of religious beliefs (as in "Tehillah") or by fatherly guilt and apprehension (as in *In the Prime of Her Life*). The arranged marriage in *A Simple Story* is totally devoid of any moral value.

In this respect, "In a Single Moment" and *A Simple Story* stand as mirror images of each other: parallel and opposite, reflecting and negating one another. (Agnon has a penchant for the mirror trope in his works, both as a motif and a narrative structure). As such, in the following discussion, I would like to use Mintz's observation about the connection between parenthood, arranged marriage, and moral values in a time of historical transition in "In a Single Moment" in order to illuminate similar themes in *A Simple Story*. I will try to point out the inevitable connection between the abolishment of moral order and the failure of parenthood not only on the level of the family, but also in the town as a whole. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that the much-discussed therapy of Hirshl by Dr. Langsam serves to reestablish parenthood through reenacting the process of rearing a child as well as by evoking the historical memory of moral order.

MORAL VALUES AND MELANCHOLIA

When Blume Nacht, the penniless orphaned girl, alone, enters the house of her rich relatives, the Hurvitz family in Szybusz (the literary name of Buczacz in the novel), the son of the family, Hirshl, is very nice and welcoming, but his mother is as cold as a stone. Tsirl treats Blume as a liability and makes it very clear how unwelcome she is. Lucky for Blume, Tsirl soon realizes that the intelligent and hard-working girl has the making of a very good servant. Not only is Blume a perfect housekeeper and

an accomplished cook, but, since she is family, there is no need to pay her a wage: “After all,” said Tsirl to her husband, ‘she is one of us, isn’t she? He who rewards us will reward her too.’”¹⁰

The narrator, who keeps shifting from irony to empathy, ostensibly defends Tsirl’s exploitation of the girl. It only *seems* “that Blume was being taken advantage of.” He is confident that “when Blume’s time came to marry,”¹¹ Tsirl “would surely compensate her for each year of work.”¹² This, of course, will never materialize. Not only will Tsirl not pay Blume a dime, but, when the girl’s time comes to marry, she will also ruthlessly shatter all her hopes. Tsirl is quick to notice that Hirshl and Blume, who grow up together and share the same intellectual interest in books, have fallen in love with each other. Surprisingly, she takes no action and says nothing: “The same good sense that make her think, Why, the boy would have to be mad to fall in love with a penniless orphan, made her keep silent too. Let him have his flirtation with Blume, she thought. Once he grows up, he’ll marry someone suitable.” Tsirl’s attitude toward Blume is utterly instrumental: “she felt grateful to Blume for keeping Hirshl away from other girls, for even in Szybusz, she knew, youthful morals were not what they once were.”¹³ It does not matter to Tsirl *at all* that the girl will fall more and more in love with her son as time passes, and that eventually her heart will be broken.

Tsirl never shows even a morsel of empathy toward Blume. Undoubtedly, she dislikes Blume, but the lack of empathy is not just personal; it characterizes Tsirl in general. For example, unlike Boruch Meir, she refuses to give a dime to the town’s beggars and condescendingly tells them off, ignoring the Jewish ethical obligation of *tsedaqah*.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Tsirl is not totally devoid of empathy. She feels sorry for her future daughter in law, Mina, with regard to her most minor discomforts as well as for her real suffering when she is pregnant and Hirshl loses his mind. The difference in her attitude toward the two young women stems from the fact that Mina is “one of us”—namely, a relative—while Blume, who is left unpaid because she supposedly is “one of us,” is not truly “one of us.” This is why, for example, when the Hurvitzes go to visit friends, they never take Blume with them; she is not *really* one of the family. For Tsirl, the broad distinction between “one of us” and “all the others” corresponds with the distinction between the rich and the poor. Her knack as a shopkeeper is her ability to tell the financial status of her customers even when

they try to disguise it, and she treats them, as well as everybody else, in keeping with their relative wealth or poverty.

At the same time, although Mina is rich and Tsirl likes her very much, and Blume is poor and Tsirl dislikes her very much, her fundamental attitude toward both of them is similar. Except for her nearest kin, her husband and son, with whom—in her own mind—she forms one entity, Tsirl regards everybody else as “others,” as mere objects of exploitation. She does not abide by Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative, never to treat the other “merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end.”¹⁵ For her, neither Mina nor Blume is by any sense an “end”; both are just means for an end that only she contrives. The only difference between them is that Mina is a cherished object, an asset, while Blume is unwanted, and a threat at that.

Tsirl’s animosity toward Blume goes beyond her general instrumental attitude toward others. It seems that she really hates the girl. She claims for herself all of Blume’s achievements in the household and complains that the exploited, hard-working girl is nothing but a spoiled brat. When Blume first arrives at the Hurvitz home, she brings with her some cakes and offers them to the family. Tsirl—who actually is a glutton for rich food—scolds her: “‘Thanks be to God’, said Tsirl, her tone of voice changing, ‘that we aren’t cake eaters and pastry nibblers here. Plain ordinary bread is good enough for us.’”¹⁶ Later on, she gives Blume worn-out dresses and shoes, and, when she uses the wearable garments and discards the ones that are not usable, Tsirl again seizes the opportunity to criticize her: “‘I myself save everything,’ Tsirl liked to say, ‘Not like our Blume, who throws out whatever she doesn’t care for.’”¹⁷

Why does Tsirl hate Blume so much? It is true that Blume is the daughter of Miril, who many years ago was engaged to Boruch Meir, but it seems that Tsirl does not care about the deceased woman at all. It is Blume herself who compromises Tsirl’s beliefs: she represents values that are incompatible with a social order based on financial status. Blume is a bookish girl. After her father, Ḥayyim Nacht, lost all his money and could no longer provide for his family, he called her to sit with him and read books: “‘I know’ said Ḥayyim Nacht ‘that I won’t be leaving you any riches, but at least I’ll have taught you how to read a book. No matter how black your life may be, you can always find a better one in books.’”¹⁸ In his melancholy and

passivity, Hayyim Nacht embodies the dichotomy between books and the so-called real world, between the intellectual sphere and material success. Blume refuses to accept this romantic dichotomy. She has the inner force and mental capability to combine hard work and intellectual interests. This is exactly why Tsirl abhors her. Blume's education and values compromise the exclusivity of financial success as a mark of merit.¹⁹ Blume possesses virtues, abilities, and knowledge that are far beyond Tsirl's reach, and it makes her presence intolerable. Books frighten Tsirl for another reason. She "had had a brother who, instead of turning out normal, had been driven mad by his academic studies."²⁰ When his parents tore up his books, he found others, "and when they finally threw him out of the house he took to the woods and lived there on berries and plants like a beast until his vital powers failed him and he died."²¹ Blume shares her love for books with Hirshl; once a week he borrows one book for serious and two for light reading for him and Blume. The content of the books is not specified, but the serious ones probably contain learning material while the light ones probably describe the joys and sorrows of love. Tsirl is not afraid that reading three books a week will, on its own, inflict madness on her son, but madness has run in her family for generations. Her grandfather's grandfather had insulted the town's rabbi by remarking that the latter is going out of his mind, and the rabbi cursed him in retaliation: "From that day on there was not a generation in Tsirl's family without its madmen."²² Tsirl protects herself from madness by defying intellectual tendencies, stormy emotions, and romantic ideas. She restricts herself and her family to the bourgeois social order of accumulating money and devouring food as a defense against the devastating powers of madness.

When the army's draft board is about to come to Szybusz, Tsirl decides that it is time for Hirshl to get married. She summons the town's matchmaker, Yona Toyber, and discusses with him her choice for a future daughter-in-law: Mina, the daughter of Gedalya and Bertha Ziemlich. Not only is Gedalya a rich man, but his wealth also comes from growing food, as he is the count's estate manager in the village of Malikrowik. His wife, Bertha, is an excellent cook, so money and food will marry money and food. Tsirl tells her husband about the planned *shidukh*, and he, as usual, accepts: "Boruch Meir was not in the habit of contradicting his wife."²³ She is well aware of the historical change that is taking place in Szybusz and knows that she needs to manipulate her son to accept her choice of bride. The old days when parents

simply decided their children's future in marriage are gone, and, in present times, modern young men and women have novel ideas about falling in love and choosing their own spouses.²⁴ Tsirl invites Mina to visit whenever she comes to Szybusz, and then, one day, when Hirshl goes down to the cellar to fetch wine, Tsirl follows him and closes the door behind her. In the intimacy and total darkness of the cellar, she tells him that Mina is an educated girl, a daughter of a wealthy man and his only heir. Marriage, Tsirl lectures her son, is a serious business and, like all other businesses, is based on money: "A bachelor can be free to follow his heart, but what would the world come to if he didn't put his romances aside when the time came to get married? A fine place it would be if everyone followed their hearts!"²⁵ Blume is a good girl, but she has not a cent to her name. They were kind enough to take her into their house and provide for her needs, but now, says Tsirl, "I'm sure she knows her proper place and would never want to come between you and your good fortune."²⁶

Hirshl does not answer his mother, neither on the spot nor in the following days. He needs Blume to fight this battle for him, but Blume needs him to stand up for himself. This does not happen. When Blume falls in love with Hirshl, she knows that she is heading toward great trouble; she does her work, but "Never once did she smile, while her mouth hung slightly open as if it has either given up talking in the middle of a sentence or else were about to scream."²⁷ When her fears are realized, she is deeply hurt and avoids Hirshl, and they both suffer greatly. "In a vague way Hirshl began to feel that, if he did not stand steadfast forever, this would only be because Blume had abandoned him."²⁸ When Blume leaves the house, Tsirl seizes the opportunity and manipulates Hirshl even further. While consoling him, she misrepresents Blume's heartbreak as lack of love: "Better to marry a woman who respects you than to run after one who doesn't care."²⁹ Hirshl remembers that

Once, when he had been a small boy, a friend had jilted him; seeing how hurt he was Tsirl took him in her arms, where her kisses and caresses soon put the friend out of his mind. And although Hirshl was now a young man, the same thing had happened again."³⁰

The analogy to the childhood incident is significant. The memory evokes a very rare occasion of motherly warmth because, in general, Tsirl was a cold mother: "As

soon as Hirshl was weaned, Tsirl went back to working full-time in the store [...] And though Hirshl was her only child, she was careful not to show him too much love in order not to spoil him.”³¹ When a baby, he never heard a lullaby, because Tsirl “had never sung to him,” supposedly “because she knew her voice was unmusical.”³² Tsirl’s reaction to Hirshl’s disappointment with his childhood friend has a long-standing effect; he is very close to his mother even as a young man, and he has no friends, just some acquaintances for whom he does not really care.

All the same, Tsirl’s demand from Hirshl to abandon the woman he deeply loves and marry a stranger he hardly knows is extreme. Why does he not refuse? In his words, “Why, Hirshl asked himself, do I put up with it?”³³ Indeed, why does he not ask Blume for her hand in marriage and present his parents with a fait accompli? For sure, Tsirl and Boruch Meir would not have banished him, their only son, just because he wants to marry an honest and good girl like Blume. His mother undoubtedly would have been angry with him but not utterly surprised: “Tsirl was clever enough to know that she lived in an age when no parent could force a son to do anything, much less to marry against his will.”³⁴

Still, Hirshl complies with his mother’s demands. He has no power to stand against her. According to A. B. Yehoshua and Amos Oz, the blame for his weakness lies with the women in his life, Tsirl and Blume. Yehoshua claims that, because Tsirl is a domineering and emotionally insufficient mother, Hirshl seeks motherly love from Blume, but Blume is subdued and irresponsive, *blumab* (closed, in Hebrew) by name and closed by nature.³⁵ According to Oz, Tsirl is like a beast, hardly human, and a castrating mother on top of it. Not only does she get rid of Blume, but she also creates a threat to his relationship with Mina. Oz claims that Hirshl loses his mind in order to free himself from his mother’s grasp and be able to enjoy, behind her back, a blissful sexual relationship with his wife.³⁶ Blume, on the other hand, is frigid, actually not a real woman; if Hirshl had married her, he would have ended up in total misery. Oz’s harsh description of Tsirl (or Blume) seems tendentious, and it does not appear to me that Hirshl’s terrible psychotic crisis is a calculated act. Furthermore, he has no need at all to fight his mother in order to enjoy erotic bliss with his wife. The young couple lives in their own house, and Tsirl is very pleased with Mina, “for whom she felt a special affection for having agreed to become her daughter-in-law, thus saving Hirshl from the clutches of Blume.”³⁷

In my eyes, there are two reasons for Hirshl's inability to stand on his own and marry the woman he deeply loves. One is his melancholy; the other is his moral and psychological immaturity. At the age of nineteen, while his contemporaries in Szybusz, such as Getzel Stein, are adults—grown up men—Hirshl is still a child. He cannot evolve from childhood to manhood because no one has raised him properly. As mentioned before, his mother emotionally abandoned him at a very tender age, immediately when she stopped nursing him. From then on, she worked in the shop from early morning until late in the evening. Hirshl was put in the care of her servant, a morbid *'agunah* who did not waste her time on frivolous activities like singing to the baby; she “was too busy with the housework or with sewing the shrouds for her funeral to have any time for such things.”³⁸ Near the end of the novel, when Hirshl comes back to Szybusz after his stay in Dr. Langsam's nursing home, he wishes for his baby son a better childhood than he had; he knows that there was no joy in his own childhood, and that it “was not blessed.”³⁹

The sudden and traumatic loss of the care and intimacy of the mother in his infancy rendered Hirshl melancholic in later years. According to Sigmund Freud, “melancholia too may be the reaction to the loss of a loved object [...] the object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love.”⁴⁰ Hirshl's melancholia precedes his heartbreak over Blume. At the age of sixteen, he reflects that, “There were those who claimed that the whole problem with the world was its being divided into the rich and the poor. Indeed that was a problem. Certainly, though, it was not the main one. The main problem was that everything came about with so much pain.”⁴¹ The loss of Blume three years later repeats the childhood trauma. Hirshl's melancholia deepens; the world seems to him to be devoid of meaning and interest: “How worthless is the human being. Sleeps only to wake up, wakes up only to go to sleep. And between waking and sleeping his lot is only trouble and misery, injury and insult.”⁴² Reminiscent of Freud's description of the melancholic, Hirshl feels “profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings”; he is ambivalent toward his lost love object (Blume), rejects food, and finds it difficult to sleep.⁴³ “The sleeplessness in melancholia testifies to the rigidity of the condition,” says Freud, and when Hirshl's sleeplessness worsens, his mental state deteriorates to psychosis.⁴⁴

Not only Hirshl's relationship with his mother but also that with his father is to blame for his lack of stamina. He feels that both of them render him powerless: "[A]s long as I am dependent on my father and mother I cannot amend anything." Later he says, "Nevertheless, as long as I am under the control of my father and my mother, I cannot change my ways."⁴⁵ Unlike his wife, Boruch Meir is a warm parent. When Hirshl is born, he loves him "to excesses,"⁴⁶ "holds him in his hands, presses him to his heart and plays with him even when his wife is not around."⁴⁷ Boruch Meir is a loving parent and husband, a nice person in general, and a very successful shopkeeper. His only flaw as a father figure is his weakness. In the words of Baruch Kurzweil, in his relation to Tsirl, he is "a small passive type."⁴⁸ Boruch Meir comes from a humble origin. He marries high above his class to the daughter of a rich man, Shimon Hirsh Klinger, only because the wealthy families in Szybusz would not wed their sons to a girl who comes from a house plagued with lunacy. Boruch Meir works in Klinger's shop for six and a half years and looks up to him in awe. When Klinger offers him his daughter's hand in marriage, he accepts immediately and transfers his obedience and servile attitude from the father to the daughter. Boruch Meir always agrees with Tsirl and never thinks or says anything that Tsirl has not thought or said before.

Quite a few obstacles stand in the way of life as a couple for Boruch Meir and Tsirl. The marriage is an arranged affair, Boruch Meir breaks his promise to his beautiful cousin Mirl, he never feels equal to his wife, and Tsirl has to marry one of her father's servants instead one of the sons of the respectable families in Szybusz. Nevertheless, the bond between the two is a very happy one. It is true that the climax of their intimacy is when they sit in the evening together in the half-closed shop and count the money they made during the day. Some people, says the narrator, "insisted that only the man driven out of his senses by passion could claim to be love's acolyte," but he adds, "the passion for love misled them about love itself." Boruch Meir and Tsirl "had no time for such diversions," and they did not drive each other out of their senses, yet "He simply was as happy with her as she was with him."⁴⁹ Not only are they good partners and very fond of each other, but they also maintain a strong physical attraction. The narrator does hint that Tsirl has lost her sex drive: she "had reached the age when what concerns a woman most is eat and drink," but it seems that his remark is misleading.⁵⁰ Undoubtedly, Tsirl loves

her food, but, until Hirshl's mental breakdown, she keeps both her appetites, for food and for her husband: "As for Tsirl, she kept her eyes on Boruch Meir. Other wives might not have spent their son's engagement party looking at their husband [like this,] but Boruch Meir was no ordinary husband. At the age of forty-seven he was still young in body and mind,"⁵¹ and Boruch Meir reciprocates: "Boruch Meir looked lovingly at Tsirl. Her round, rosily tinged face, with its head of dark hair seemed suddenly changed to him. Indeed, each time he looked at her he discovered something new."⁵²

Boruch Meir's subservience to his wife does not compromise the happiness of his marriage, nor does it interfere with his love for his son, but it is a symptom of his moral weakness, and it has a devastating effect on his son's psyche. According to Freud, in the process of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex, "The object-cathexes are given up and replaced by identifications. The authority of the father or the parents is introjected into the ego, and there it forms the nucleus of the super-ego."⁵³ The problem is not that Boruch Meir has wrong values, but that he is too weak to hold to his own values, is happy to adopt his wife's views, and always affirms her moral conduct.⁵⁴ Because the father with whom Hirshl identifies, whose authority he internalizes, is morally weak, his emotional maturity is undermined. The text criticizes Tsirl's base materialistic values, but it is not clear what Boruch Meir's values are. It is clear, though, that, whatever they were, he gave them up when he decided to abandon Mirl and marry Tsirl for the sake of money: "Tsirl's silver and gold blinded Boruch Meir's eyes, so he deserted his relative and married her."⁵⁵ When Blume comes to his house, he has an opportunity to make a symbolic amend and marry his son to Mirl's orphaned daughter, but it seems that this kind of recognition of his fault and wish for atonement does not cross his mind.⁵⁶ Unlike his wife, Boruch Meir is kind to Blume, but his kindness is weak and limited: he does not seem to mind that his poor relative works in his house for years without pay. Boruch Meir never opposes his wife; it is little wonder that his son cannot find in himself the strength to defy her in the morally charged and extremely sensitive issue of marrying Blume.

There is another important sense in which ethical issues affect Hirshl's psyche. Tsirl's crude egotism and Boruch Meir's subservience to her represent the moral decline of Szybusz as a whole. The abandonment of the old world of the Torah

creates a society devoid of moral values, of solidarity or compassion. Hirshl's melancholia stems from the loss not only of the care of his mother when he was an infant, but also of the moral order of the community in which he grows up. Freud claims that melancholia, like mourning, can be the reaction "to the loss of some abstraction [...] such as one's country, liberty, an ideal and so on."⁵⁷ At the age of sixteen, when Hirshl reflects, as quoted before, that "everything came about with so much pain," he has an intuition about the source of his grievance:

Hirshl himself could not explain this pain. From the moment he first saw the light of day he never lacked for food or clothing, nor for the attention of good people who lavished him with kindness and lovingly fulfilled his every wish. Perhaps he had eyes to see that the same people who were so good to him were not always as good to others, which grieved him.⁵⁸

In the minds of Tsirl and Boruch Meir, to be good parents means to keep for their son all they have and can achieve. This seemingly devoted behavior turns, against their good intentions, into a parental failure. The norm of egotistic selfishness deprives Hirshl of an upbringing in a supportive and caring community. Moreover, the habitual moral egotism of his parents diminishes their emotional amplitude. Not only can Tsirl not feel motherly compassion toward an orphaned girl who comes to her house, but she also cannot find in herself real empathy for her son's broken heart. Parental love is limited; as a result (and also as a kind of symbol), the families that stand in the center of the novel are very small. In the Eastern European Jewish society of large families, the Hurvitz, Nacht, and Ziemlich families consisted of a father, a mother, and only one child.⁵⁹ After having Hirshl, Tsirl "was not expecting more children [...] neither was she anxious to have them."⁶⁰

Tsirl's base "shopkeeping logic"—namely, get as much as you can and give as little as you can—plays an important role in another story by Agnon, "Panim Aḥerot" ("Another Face"). In "Another Face," as well as in *A Simple Story*, the implementation of the shopkeeping logic in the emotional sphere triggers a disaster. In "Another Face," Michael Hartman ruins his marriage to Toni because he tries to manage all the aspects of his life according to these commercial principles: "Michael Hartman was a merchant, and sold his commodities in exact measures, and he knew

that he who wastes one measure is short that same measure.”⁶¹ Not only is Michael angry with Toni because she “wastes” her kindness by talking to other people or playing with their babies, but he also stingily refuses to give any measure of kindness to his own family. After the divorce, when Michael and Toni stroll aimlessly in the streets, he buys flowers from a little peddler girl. Through this trifle encounter, Toni can, for the first time, show him that the shopkeeping logic is incongruent with the logic of love; in the latter, “wasting” a measure might be a gain, not a loss. From this point on, Michael can start a therapeutic process that will culminate in a meaningful insight at the end of the story.⁶² When Hirshl falls in love with Blume, he tries childishly and halfheartedly to defend himself from the pain of the situation by using the familiar shopkeeping logic in regards to her:

I see you're keeping accounts, thought Hirshl. If you mean to give me the silent treatment, two can play at that game: I can be as silent as you. And yet the fact was that it was Hirshl, the son and grandson of shopkeepers who were used to weighing and measuring, who was keeping accounts.”⁶³

Nevertheless, when Hirshl sees how anguished Blume's eyes are, his attitude of “keeping accounts” dissipates.

It is important to note that, in the passage I quoted before, “people”—not just Hirshl's parents—were good to him but not to others. In a sense, Szybusz as a whole (although, for Hirshl, this mainly means his family's social stratum) functions as an overarching parent. In many works by Agnon, the hometown of Buczacz (or Szybusz) is figured as a “big mother.” Various texts portray the town as a nurturing entity, and it has a signature smell of the beloved food. In the novel *A Guest for a Night*, the narrator comes to visit his old hometown after the terrible devastation inflicted on it during World War I and its aftermath. Even in its state of ruin and decay, still “the odor of Szybusz had not yet evaporated—the odor of millet boiled in honey, which never leaves the town from the day after Passover until the end of November, when the snow falls, covering all.”⁶⁴ According to Mintz, in *A City In its Fullness*, in the earlier period, “when Buczacz was a fragile band of survivors in the throes of recovering from the 1648 massacres,” the *qehilab*, the community, was united and protected its traumatized sons and daughters, but, as the moral order declines after the partition of Poland,

its positive parental functions diminish.⁶⁵ In a story like “Hane‘elam” (“Disappeared,”) which describes the city in times of modernization under the rule of Austria, the terrible injustice toward the most vulnerable members of the *qehilah* exemplifies that “the world of Buczacz is bereft of human feeling and communal responsibility.”⁶⁶ The city becomes a cruel mother that eats her weakest young.⁶⁷ In *A Simple Story*, “Szybusz has a pledge that he who eats her dishes will stay with her forever.”⁶⁸ She is the mother who swallows her sons by feeding them.⁶⁹

Ultimately, Hirshl is pushed into announcing the engagement to Mina by the city itself; namely, by the society of the well-to-do, modern Jews in Szybusz. It happens at a party thrown by Mina’s friend, Sophia Gildenhorn. The gathering is almost hellish. It is vulgar and crude; the guests play cards, crack jokes, and exchange insults, and the mix of cigarette smoke and oil fumes from the kitchen causes Hirshl nausea and dizziness. In one of his somber moments, the narrator claims that Yitzchok Gildenhorn’s parties and his friends’ demeaning behavior was to blame for the moral deterioration of the city: “Indeed the decline and fall of Szybusz’s old patricians had begun on the day that Gildenhorn moved into town.”⁷⁰ In this depraved environment, Hirshl, who finds refuge in talking to Mina, takes her hand in his, and Yitzchok Gildenhorn seizes the moment and congratulates him (in snobbish Germanized Yiddish) for an engagement that did not yet exist. Later on, the couple’s parents join the party, and Boruch Meir rubs his hands in pleasure, observing that the party brought about his son’s engagement: “*khevre, khevre*” he exclaims, “like a man who says, it is not my doing, the responsibility for this stays with the *khevre*.”⁷¹ In Yiddish, the word *khevre* means both “friends” and “society.”

It seems to bother Hirshl that immoral and cynical people like Yitzchok Gildenhorn and his friends announce his engagement to Mina. When he meets with her after the party, in a family gathering in Malikrowik, he decides to tell her, totally out of context, a historical anecdote about the immorality and cruelty of Jewish society, about the misuse of power by the rich and mighty. The story took place in Stanislaw, the city where Mina was staying while she was studying in a boarding school for educated Jewish girls. It is

about a party of Jewish refugees from Rumania who appeared one day before you were born in Stanislaw, where the bailiff of the community

refused to take them in for fear of them becoming a burden, so they were forced to squat in squalor with their wives and children before the city gates, until their cries for help reached the heavens.⁷²

Mina is fascinated:

How curious, she marveled, thinking about the hard-hearted bailiff. I've been in that man's house to visit his granddaughters and never found him cruel at all. In fact, he once gave me a friendly pat on the back. And even if his cheeks are blue and he always looks unshaven, what sort of proof for cruelty is that?⁷³

Mina is mildly puzzled by the revelation of the immanent cruelty of her social stratum; Hirshl is deeply disturbed by it. His misgivings and dark premonition hang heavily over him during the wedding ceremony, and his melancholia deepens over the following days and weeks. The loss of Blume, whom he still deeply loves, is unbearable, and his surrender to his mother and to the degraded social order he despises is insufferable.

PSYCHOSIS AND TREATMENT

The heart-rending and overwhelming description of Hirshl's mental breakdown is one of Agnon's greatest literary achievements. It is not in the scope of this article to do it justice, but I would like to refer to one aspect of it; namely, Hirshl's rejection of the social order and consequently its total disintegration in his mind. As Hirshl's depression deepens, he thinks more and more about his uncle who lost his mind and perished. In the beginning of the novel, the uncle's madness is explained as stemming from an old curse or a hereditary mental illness that plagues the family, but, in Hirshl's tormented mind, in his horror and rage, the uncle appears as a romantic rebel:

It was storming violently outside. The trees swayed in the wind. The birds and beasts of the forest hid as best they could, and not even a bug showed

its face. One man alone was out on such a night, because he had no house to call his own. Who was he? Why, Hirshl's uncle, who had been banished by his parents for [he had crossed the line].⁷⁴

In his fantasy, his uncle is not dead but alive, and he is not crazy but an intellectual rebel. In Hebrew, the expression *yatsa' huts lashurah* ("crossed the line") suggests that the uncle broke religious norms and educated himself in European culture. During the decades before Hirshl was born, the vast majority of the Jewish community in Szybusz was orthodox and would have considered reading non-Jewish books of science, philosophy, or literature a form of heresy, with the transgressor ostracized as an *apigores*. Nothing in the novel except Hirshl's fantasy suggests that this was the case with his uncle. Hirshl's next fantasy imagines an idyllic return to nature, which renders society, with its oppressive rules and restrictions, escapable. In Hirshl's imagination, his uncle lives in a prelapsarian world in which he does not have to work to provide for himself. While Hirshl's parents invest their entire energy in pursuing material success, the uncle embodies an alternative reality:

Sometimes the trees stood quietly at peace while a mild sun shone down on them and the birds flew chattering among their branches, a good smell of grass and mushrooms filled the air, and Hirshl's uncle lay on his back, happy to be alone and unbothered. When he was hungry, he picked and ate berries. When he was thirsty, he drank from the spring, [unlike all other people, who fictionally created for themselves fictional houses, shops, customers and wives.]⁷⁵

When psychosis takes over, Hirshl runs from the morning prayer in the house of study to the woods, following the footsteps of his uncle. Civilization should protect its members from the lawlessness and dangers of the wilderness, but, when the moral order in the city disintegrates, when there is no justice or value except the ruthless rule of power, when society kills the hearts of her sons inside their bosoms, the woods become a refuge.⁷⁶ Hirshl casts off the external signs of social order. He throws his hat, he takes off his shoe and puts it on his head, he lies on his back and spits, and the spit falls back into his eyes. Before his breakdown, during the long

and tormenting nights of insomnia, Hirshl develops an obsessive hatred toward the town's roosters who disturb his sleep. As Gershon Shaked points out, the rooster is a central figure in the novel.⁷⁷ Tsirl devours poultry dishes that Blume cooks for her; in the engagement feast in Malikrowik, Hirshl avoids eating the fatty gravy served in a china pot shaped like a duck and ponders whether his uncle was a misunderstood vegetarian.

If my mother would not have her heart set on Ziemlich's money, thought Hirshl, I would not have to be sitting here right now with all this cooked dead flesh in front of me. He looked up to see if anything was left of these abominations, whose smell [arouse his appetite] and caught sight of Mina.⁷⁸

In Hebrew, one of the names of the cock is “man” (*gever*) and its crowing is the “call of the man” (*qeri'at hagever*). The rooster symbolizes Hirshl's manhood, which was fractured by his mother. On the morning of his breakdown, the people in the house of study discuss a special kind of poultry. The question is whether one should check, after slaughtering the birds, if they have cavities in their skulls that would render them unkosher. The discussion agitates Hirshl. He is frightened that he is about to crow like a rooster, that people might think that he is mad. “I'm glad,” he thinks, “that I scream like a man and do not crow like a rooster.”⁷⁹ In the Hebrew, “and do not crow like a rooster” (*ve'eyni gore kegever*), also means “and I do not call like a man.” Hirshl runs away from the house of study to the woods, feeling “as light as a feather.”⁸⁰ He is preoccupied with both the wish to be a rooster and the fear that being a rooster means losing his mind. He thinks that if he had hanged himself from a tree, he would have heard not the crowing of the rooster but the croak of the frogs in the river. In mock talmudic fashion, he argues confusedly that one might think that he is crazy because he crows like a rooster, but, because he accepts this argument, and because he is not crazy, he does not crow like a rooster but only quacks like a duck, *ga ga ga*. At sundown, some townspeople find him in a field, “with one shoe on one foot and the other on his forehead, an expression of great anguish in his eyes. It was hard to look at him.” Hirshl cries to them: “Don't cut my throat! I'm not a rooster! I'm not!”⁸¹ The men bring Hirshl home; when Mina tries

to stroke his hair, he pulls his head away and calls her by the name of his lost love: “Blume I didn’t go cockle doodle do, I just went *ga ga ga*.’ Mina fainted dead away and was put to bed at once.”⁸²

The rooster symbolizes for Hirshl not only his robbed manhood but also his sense of the lost order of time. The rooster’s crowing at the crack of dawn marks the beginning of the day. For Hirshl, as for Hamlet, “The time is out of joint.”⁸³ When he leaves his house in the morning, his watch stops, is out of order, and Mina tells him that the time is half past seven. From then on, the time for him remains half past seven. When examined by a doctor, he responds to all his questions with the same answer: half past seven. Likewise, Hirshl’s language is out of proper order. His deranged talk marks him as someone who drifts away from normal discourse. It is interesting to note that the language of his insanity has its own beauty and poetic impact. In the chapters that describe his acute melancholia and psychosis, the mad figurative imagination becomes the poetic language of the text itself. Moreover, Hirshl’s cock-a-doodle-dos and *ga-ga-gas*, as well as his inability to walk on his hind legs, render him, in the words of Noam Pines, “infrahuman.”⁸⁴ Hirshl turns into a hybrid, a scared and bewildered rooster-man, although he denies it vehemently and claims that he is just a duck-man or a frog. Animal-human hybrids play a central role in some of Agnon’s major works, in the novel *Temol shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*) and in his long stories “Shevu’at ’emunim” (“Betrothed”), “Mazal dagim” (“Pisces”), and “Hadam vekhisei” (“Stool and Chair”).⁸⁵ The appearance of hybrids in Agnon’s works is always ominous, and it evokes the presence of the unconscious and of death.⁸⁶

After two days, Hirshl’s parents take him to Dr. Langsam’s sanatorium in Lemberg. Leaving Szybusz, his wife, his parents, and everyone in Szybusz is good for Hirshl. Dr. Langsam does not ask him or his parents any questions. He lets him rest, he gives him his late wife’s books to read and talks to him about them, tells him stories about his own old hometown, and sings to him the endless, sad songs of the blind beggars who used to come to his old town. Langsam’s unorthodox and especially non-Freudian methods have puzzled Agnon’s critics and inspired insightful interpretations.⁸⁷ For example, Shaked claims that Langsam exposes Hirshl’s romantic ideas about life, literature, and love as false and thus diminishes his fascination with the irrational and imaginary aspects of the psyche. The disillusioned

Hirshl can now accept his mundane life in the bourgeois society in Szybusz.⁸⁸ According to Dan Miron, by describing Langsam's treatment, Agnon reflects on his own way as a writer. Should he, as his body of readers may have expected at the time, provide them, like the good Dr. Langsam does, with a literary remedy, offer them aesthetic sublimation by telling them in a naïve mode (to use Friedrich Schiller's term) stories about their old, lost hometowns? Or maybe he should refrain from such literary practices and make them see the harsh reality of present times as he does, for example, in his next novel, *Oreah natah lalun* (*A Guest for the Night*):⁸⁹

I argue that Dr. Langsam heals Hirshl by way of two acts. First, he reconstructs his lost and damaged childhood. Second, he evokes for him the historical memory of moral order. The old and lonely doctor finds in himself fatherly love for Hirshl: "The combination of meekness, resignation and sadness that he saw in Hirshl's face made the old doctor take an instant liking to him."⁹⁰ With this love, he, as it were, rears him again from babyhood to childhood and from adolescence to manhood. In the first days, Dr. Langsam puts Hirshl in bed like a baby and brings him food and drink. After three days of sleeping off his fatigue, the psychosis subsides. The melancholic Hirshl talks ceaselessly and confusedly. Instead of examining him, Dr. Langsam comes every day, sits down by his bed, and tells him stories about his own old hometown, which he left forty years earlier. "Had anyone asked Hirshl how Dr. Langsam was treating him, he might have replied in surprise: What? Is he a doctor? Still, he could feel he is being healed."⁹¹ Hirshl never mentions Blume to the doctor, and he is very grateful for the consoling touch when Dr. Langsam holds Hirshl's hand in his own firm hand.⁹² In the next stage, the doctor treats Hirshl not like a baby but like a little boy. Every day, Schrenzl, the "fatherly orderly," helps Hirshl dress, takes him to the garden, and, after a couple of hours, helps him undress again and puts him to bed.⁹³ Hirshl knows that he is an inmate in the sanatorium, not free to leave the place, but it does not make him angry. "If anything, he felt grateful, as a homeless child might be expected to feel towards someone who has taken him in. Indeed, Hirshl had good reasons for feeling this way, because he had never been better off."⁹⁴ Langsam talks to Hirshl every day. "These chats must have stimulated the doctor too, for the more he said the more he had to say." Although Dr. Langsam has lived in big cities and studied in famous universities, "nothing had remained in his memory, it seemed, but the little town he grew up in."⁹⁵ Two stories stand out in

the doctor's reminiscences. One is about the town's values, those of the Torah rather than of money. According to what he remembers, scholars in his old hometown studied day and night out of their love of the Torah, not caring about food, drink, or sleep, not wanting anything except the light of the Torah. Only the old local rabbinical judge wished for something—for the book, *Maḥatsit hasheqel*, which he could not afford to buy. This *dayyan* used to write his comments on the Talmud with a feather, and when he did not have even that, he used his fingernail to scratch signs on the paper. The other story Dr. Langsam tells is about the mysterious beauty of art, which always stems from a great loss:

Sometimes Dr. Langsam told Hirshl about the blind musicians who sat on empty sacks in the marketplace of his town and coaxed from their instruments such boundlessly sweet music that it could put one into a trance. And though the doctor's voice was that of an old man, Hirshl was as entranced by the sweet, gruff sadness of it as he might have been by a lullaby, had he ever heard one when he was a child.⁹⁶

Meanwhile, Hirshl receives a message that Mina has borne him a son. His insomnia returns as a result, but, after some time, it once again subsides. Hirshl thus reaches the third stage of therapeutic maturation. Like a grumpy adolescent, he rebels somewhat against Dr. Langsam, who supposedly holds him captive. Hirshl begins to think about the duties he needs to assume, such as appearing before the army recruiting committee, participating in his son's *pidyon haben* ("redemption of the firstborn") ceremony, and resuming his work in the shop.

Soon after this, Hirshl returns home to Szybusz. It helps that most people in town assume that his madness was a trick to avoid recruitment into the army. Hirshl's fears that he would not be able to love his son prove wrong; as time passes, he wishes less and less for Mina to disappear and for Blume to return and put him under her protective wing. The baby, Meshulam, is sickly and does not develop well, so his parents send him to his grandparents in Malikrowik. In a symbolic way, Hirshl aspires through this act of sending away his child to make the sickly, underdeveloped, childish parts of his psyche disappear.⁹⁷ Ostensibly, from then on, everything seems to be alright. Hirshl and Mina are very happy together, enjoying

marital life and sexual bliss and having another son, this time a strong and happy baby. Both Hirshl and his father, Boruch Meir, gain weight, while the traumatized Tsirl, who has learned that the ruthless exercise of power can in some cases work against her, loses her famous appetite. All in all, Hirshl appears well adjusted and content with his lot in life. When he walks with Mina in the snow in Malikrowik, they come across a blind beggar who sits and plays his sad song, which seems to have no beginning or end. Suddenly Hirshl turns away and then comes back and tosses the singer a coin, bigger than was ever given to him. Shaked claims that, through this act, Hirshl concludes all his dealings with the dark world of the imagination.⁹⁸ Hirshl is cured by Dr. Langsam, Shaked argues, but he loses his soul in the process. I am not sure that this is the case. The second childhood that Dr. Langsam gave to Hirshl enables him to be a good partner to his wife and a good father to his second son, but, as Shakespeare's Iago rightly observes, "What you know, you know."⁹⁹ One cannot un-know. Hirshl can be as bitter as he likes about Blume, but he will always remember the enormity of what he has lost, of what he has given up.

A Simple Story ends with the narrator's remark that the tale about Hirshl and Mina has ended, but not the one about Blume or Getzel Stein. It seems to me that this half-promise to write about Blume and Getzel in the future not only ironically refers to the traditional convention of the novel to tie together all the loose ends and marry off all the single young characters but also functions as a sort of consolation. Perhaps a later tale about Blume, the paragon of true virtue, independent mind, and strong character, and about Getzel Stein, the ardent activist of Po'ale Tsiyyon, the ideological Zionist and socialist movement, will offer a hope for a future Jewish society that is not devoid of moral values.

Even in this respect, "In a Single Moment" and *A Simple Story* mirror one another. "In a Single Moment" ends with a virtuous deed that unites an entire city in joy. Nevertheless, as Mintz claims, it offers but a momentary redemption. Buczacz's prospects for a spiritual future are bleak; the moral debasement of the community seems inevitable. On the other hand, *A Simple Story* ends with Hirshl's surrender and acceptance of an unjust social order that he knows causes so much suffering. He might remember his moral resistance as a younger man, but, alas, he has given it up. He might try to be a good father to his second son, but this does not take away the fact that he has already sent his first and weaker child away. In

this bleak social present, the novel's conclusion with the narrator's promise to tell a different story about different characters who hold different values brings but a flicker of hope for the future.

NOTES

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- 1 Alan Mintz, *Ancestral Tales: Reading the Buczacz Stories of S. Y. Agnon* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 338.
- 2 Mintz, *Ancestral Tales*, 385.
- 3 Mintz, *Ancestral Tales*, 391.
- 4 Mintz, *Ancestral Tales*, 338.
- 5 S. Y. Agnon, *Sippur pashut*, vol. 5 of *Kol sippurav shel Shmuel Yosef 'Agnon* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1935). "Besha 'ah ahat," *Ha'aretz*, September 16 and 25, 1955. Gustav Krojanker, *The Works of S. Y. Agnon*, trans. Jacob Gottschalk (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1991), 53 claims that the time of the story is 1905. According to Dan Miron, *Harofé bamedumeh* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995), 182, the story concludes in 1903, before the Russo-Japanese War.
- 6 Mintz, *Ancestral Tales*, 337, 339. In *A Simple Story*, the narrator keeps referring to the abandonment of the study of the Torah and of the old moral order. On the debasement of the traditional values and the historical transition to modern times in the novel, see Dov Sadan, *'Al Sh. Y. 'Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1979), 32–35; Krojanker, *Works*, 141–48; and Baruch Kurzweil, *Masot 'al sippurei S. Y. 'Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1975), 38–49, 353–58.
- 7 The first Hebrew novel, *'Ahavat Tsiyyon* (*The Love of Zion*, 1853) by Avraham Mapu, is set in Erets Yisra'el in the time of King Hezekiah and revolves around a convoluted scheme of an arranged marriage. At the end of the novel, the crimes of the antagonists are revealed and the true identity of the young protagonist, Amnon, is restored. It comes out that he and Tamar, who fell in love although they supposedly belonged to very different social strata, are not defying their fathers' old pact that their not-yet-born children would marry, but actually fulfilling it. Mapu thus ingeniously succeeds in promoting the value of romantic love without undermining the authority of the father over his daughter's marriage.

- 8 Abramovitch published the Hebrew version of the novel, *Sefer haqabtsanim* (*The Book of the Paupers*), in 1909. Naomi Seidman, *The Marriage Plot: Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016) offers a comprehensive discussion on the relationship between love, matchmaking, and the emergence of Modern Jewish literature.
- 9 There are several similarities between Berdyczewski's story and *A Simple Story*: the two children grow together as adolescents, Naomi falls in love with Klonimos, and loses her mind when his father arranges his marriage to another girl.
- 10 S. Y. Agnon, *A Simple Story*, rev. ed., trans. by Hillel Halkin, ed. Jeffrey Saks, (New Milford, CT: Toby, 2014), 7. All the further references to the English translation of the novel are from this edition.
- 11 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 7.
- 12 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 8.
- 13 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 36.
- 14 Gershon Shaked, 'Omanut hasippur shel Sh. Y. 'Agnon (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Hapo'alim, 1976), 219–21 discusses the Romantic motif of the blind beggars and its connection to the subconscious in the novel.
- 15 Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 36.
- 16 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 6. Shaked, *Omanut*, 203 claims that Tsirl's gluttony is simultaneously for food and money, both part of bourgeois society.
- 17 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 9.
- 18 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 22.
- 19 Tsirl is ambivalent even about the independence of rabbinical authority. When the seventeen-year-old Hirshl loses interest in religious studies, Tsirl thinks it is for the better: "Not that she respected religion and its scholars any less than the average woman did; still, like any occupation whose practical value was doubtful, it seemed to her less than ideal. Of course there were rabbis who earned handsome living too, but how many of them could you point to?" (Agnon, *Simple Story*, 16).
- 20 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 16. The theme of a former yeshiva student who turns to European academic studied and loses his mind first appears in Mendele Mocher Seforim (S. Y. Abramovitch), "The Nag" ("Die Kliatshe") 1873.
- 21 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 16.

- 22 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 17. The theme of a rabbi who curses a father that his son will lose his mind (or his soul) appears in Mordechai Zeev Feierberg's "Le'an?" ("Whiter?" 1899) and in Agnon's "Hanidah" ("The Outcast," 1919).
- 23 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 45.
- 24 See Seidman, *Marriage Plot*.
- 25 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 47.
- 26 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 47–48.
- 27 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 35.
- 28 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 48.
- 29 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 52.
- 30 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 53.
- 31 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 11.
- 32 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 197.
- 33 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 52.
- 34 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 52–53.
- 35 A. B. Yehoshua, "Nequdat hahatarah ba'alilah kemaftaḥ leferush hayetsirah (hadgamah 'al pi *Sippur pashut* leShai 'Agnon)," *'Aleī siaḥ* 10–11 (1981): 74–88.
- 36 Amos Oz, *Shtiqat hashamayim: 'Agnon mitlonen 'al Elohim* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1993), 39–72.
- 37 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 65. Nitza Ben Dov, *Ahavot lo me'usharot: Tiskul eroti, omanut umavet beyetsirat 'Agnon* (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'Oved, 1997), 272–93 criticized Oz's "paranoid" (perhaps misogynistic) description of Blume.
- 38 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 197.
- 39 'Agnon, *Sippur pashut, Kol sippurav shel Shmuel Yosef 'Agnon*, vol. 3, "Al kapot hamān 'ul" ("On the Handles of the Lock") (Schoken, Tel Aviv, 1962), 246 (my translation).
- 40 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1961), 14:246.
- 41 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 9–10.
- 42 'Agnon, *Sippur pashut, Kol sippurav* (1962), 196 (my translation).
- 43 'Agnon, "Sippur pashut," *Kol sippurav* (1962), 243 (my translation).
- 44 Freud, "Mourning," 253.

- 45 ‘Agnon, “Sippur pashut,” *Kol sippurav* (1962), 129, 132 (my translation). “Father and mother” is the expression for “parents” in Yiddish, but the use of it in Hebrew underscores Hirshl’s dependency on both of his parents.
- 46 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 11.
- 47 ‘Agnon, “Sippur pashut,” *Kol sippurav* (1962), 64 (my translation).
- 48 Kurzweil, *Mas’ot*, 40.
- 49 Agnon, *A Simple Story*, 45.
- 50 ‘Agnon, “Sippur pashut,” *Kol sippurav* (1962), 74 (my translation). It is true that Tsirl is a glutton for food, and that food plays a major role in the novel; see Shaked, *Omanut*, 197–227.
- 51 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 64.
- 52 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 125.
- 53 Sigmund Freud, “The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1961), 19:76.
- 54 The Freudian theory of the superego excludes ethical distinctions between so-called right and wrong values: “Freud’s explanation of morality in terms of the superego ostensibly embraces an ethical relativism”; see Ernest Wallwork, “Ethics in Psychoanalysis,” in *Textbook of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Ethel S. Person, Arnold M Cooper, and Glen O. Gabbard (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2005), 281.
- 55 ‘Agnon, “Sippur pashut,” *Kol sippurav* (1962), 68 (my translation). Kurzweil, *Mas’ot*, 43 claims that Boruch Meir does Mirl injustice and does not care. In the next generation, his son Hirshl takes after his father and does Mirl’s daughter Blume injustice, but, unlike his father, he is well aware of what he did.
- 56 In *In the Prime of her Life*, the young protagonist, Tirtza, supposedly tries to make amends by marrying her mother’s old love, Akavia Mazal, but her motives are complex and unclear; see Adi Zemach, *Qeri’ab tamah basifrut ha’ivrit bat hame’ab ha’esrim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1990), 11–24 and Michal Arbell, *Katuv ‘al ‘oro shel hakelev: Tefsat hayetsirah etsel Sh. Y. Agnon* (Jerusalem: Ben-Gurion University and Keter, 2006), 41–46. In *A Simple Story*, when Blume has to leave the Hurvitz’s house she moves to the home of Akavia and Tirza and works there as a servant.
- 57 Freud, “Mourning,” 242

- 58 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 10.
- 59 This is also the case in *In the Prime of her Life* and “In a Single Moment.”
- 60 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 11.
- 61 S. Y. ‘Agnon, “‘Al kapot hamam ‘ul” (“On the Handles of the Loc”), vol. 3 of *Kol sippurav shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon*, 8 vols. (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1962), 445 (my translation). The first version of the story was published two years before *Sippur pashut* (*Davar*, December 12, 1933) and the final version in 1941 (*Kol sippurav*, vol. 8).
- 62 Michal Arbell, “Panim aherot: Haḥeshbon hakalkali vedaḥaf hamavet,” *Ma‘asei Sippur* 4 (2018): 323–44.
- 63 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 34.
- 64 S. Y. Agnon, *A Guest for the Night*, trans. Misha Louvish (New York: Schocken, 1968), 2.
- 65 Mintz, *Ancestral Tales*, 338.
- 66 Mintz, *Ancestral Tales*, 337.
- 67 Shaked, *Omanut*, 205–6 claims that, in *A Simple Story*, Szybusz sees the world as a “big mother” who provides her goods to her successful children, and that it is necessary to be “orphaned,” literally or metaphorically (from the Jewish society), in order to become an independent adult like Blume or her suitor, Getzel Stein.
- 68 Agnon, “Sippur pashut,” *Kol sippurav* (1962), 99 (my translation).
- 69 On the great mother who swallows her sons, see Erich Neuman, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon, 1954), 10.
- 70 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 55–56.
- 71 Agnon, *Sippur pashut*, 109 (my translation). It seems that not only the Hurvitzes’ social stratum but also the city as a whole approves of the bond between the two rich families. Unlike the public uproar that follows the abandonment of the bride in “In a Single Moment,” the harsh injustice done to Blume remains private, and “the whole town was as happy for the Hurvitzes as it always was” (87).
- 72 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 78.
- 73 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 79.
- 74 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 162.
- 75 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 162.
- 76 For killing hearts inside their bosoms, see ‘Agnon, “Sippur pashut,” *Kol sippurav* (1962), 173

- 77 Shaked, *Omanut*, 222–23.
- 78 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 83.
- 79 ‘Agnon, “*Sippur pasbut*,” 215 (my translation).
- 80 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 178.
- 81 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 180.
- 82 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 181.
- 83 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 1, scene 5 (Signet Classic, New York: Penguin, 1986).
- 84 Noam Pines, *The Infrabuman: Animality in Modern Jewish Literature* (Albany: SUNY, 2018), xi–xxix.
- 85 See Arbell, *Katuv*, 132–52, 198–254; Michal Arbell, “Shirat hayam: ‘al shevu‘at emunim vebilvav yamim,” *Ot: A Journal of Literary Criticism and Theory* 6 (2016): 215–55; and Pines, *Infrabuman*, 103–30.
- 86 Only when Hirshl comes back to Szybusz and plays with his baby son can he “hop like a frog, and whistle like a bird for him” (212) without becoming an animal and crossing the line of what is accepted as normal behavior.
- 87 On Agnon’s growing interest in psychoanalysis during the 1930s, see Miron, *Harofeh* 175–83.
- 88 Shaked, *Omanut*, 222–25.
- 89 Miron, *Harofeh*, 190–95.
- 90 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 185.
- 91 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 191.
- 92 Ben Dov, *Abavot*, 208–38 discusses the figure of the hand and its importance in Hirshl’s treatment.
- 93 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 191.
- 94 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 195.
- 95 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 196.
- 96 Agnon, *Simple Story*, 196–97.
- 97 See Yehoshua, “Nequdat hahatarah,” 86.
- 98 For another discussion of this scene, see Wendy Zierler’s “Breaking the Idyll” in this volume.
- 99 William Shakespeare, *Othello*, act 5, scene 2.

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