BOOK REVIEWS


In Yaniv Hagbi, Agnon finds an ideal reader, as committed to excavating the layers of Agnon’s involvement with Jewish textual traditions as was Agnon himself in constructing that complex inter-textual relationship. For this challenge, the resources of structuralism, predicated on an appreciation for language and textuality as constitutive of human experience, prove irresistible. Hagbi reminds us of the ways in which Agnon’s modernism, his self-conscious play with writing and textuality, connects with traditional Jewish views of textuality and creation, beginning with the midrashic view that God looked into the Torah to find the blueprint for creation.

This sense of language and wordplay has a history as long as Jewish traditions of textual commentary. In recent years a number of scholars have explored the ways in which rabbinic approaches to interpretation resonate with the linguistic turn in philosophy and the rise of structuralism in the twentieth century.\(^1\) Hagbi treats this intersection between rabbinic commentary and twentieth-century linguistically oriented theories responsibly, duly noting differences and commonalities. Thus, he is careful to underscore the contrast between the anti-humanist thrust of contemporary theory, on the one hand, and the rabbinic understanding of the relationship between human beings and God that anchors the play of language and text, on the other. It is the thoroughness with which Hagbi treats both of these domains of linguistic interpretation that attests to the value of his project, giving full warrant to the title of his first chapter, “Agnon’s Philosophy of Language.”

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This philosophy of language must be understood, as Hagbi points out, in relation to destruction, loss, and absence, as the conditions for discursive production. In drawing on the suggestive distinction between primary and secondary absence that he finds in poststructuralist theory, Hagbi makes some fundamental observations about the very activity of writing:

Secondary absence is a testimony, a trace of a lost presence. Secondary absence and the presence that it negates constitute a binary opposition unit. Primary absence, ‘the total absence,’ is self-contained and independent of any registration of presence. One can perceive primary absence only through secondary absence, which mediates between pure presence and primary absence. (p. 78)

Through this distinction between two kinds of absence, Hagbi amplifies the field of Agnon studies. The model of literary production that he delineates has particular relevance for understanding the ways in which destruction and loss form the stimulus for Agnon’s literary production.

Agnon’s creativity finds a distinctive form of self-representation in the tension between absence and presence that so often structures the fictional universe in his work. Hagbi writes in this respect,

[in terms of culture, meaning and discourse, in Agnon’s eyes the ‘historical destruction’ is a secondary destruction that indicates the ‘primary destruction,’ which is an all-encompassing destruction, the destruction of writing. (p. 85)]

And further, “[o]ne aspect of the natural connection between meaning and destruction is the notion of a lost textual source” (p. 86). We need to think here only of the thematics of destruction and loss—destruction of a house and loss of a book—in the stories and novels that Agnon produced over the course of his career.

Precisely this thematic of destruction and loss enabled Agnon to draw a connection between the loss of the Temple and his own assumed birthdate of tisha b’Av, as well as the loss of his own home, first in Germany in 1924 and then in Talpiyot in 1929. Building on Hagbi’s work, my own inclination would be to connect this understanding to psychoanalytic views of creativity in relation to destruction. One might consider, for example, the work of Donald Woods Winnicott concerning the child’s development of the ability to use