MIDRASH AND THE WRITING OF AGNON

Dalia Hoshen
University of Manchester

S.Y. Agnon’s (1887-1970) oeuvre would appear to be unique in modern Hebrew literature, drawing on many different fields: literature, psychology, linguistics, philosophy, and even drama. Agnon’s oeuvre has been examined from the standpoints of Hebrew and general literature, as well as from that of Jewish tradition. His sources have been debated from various angles, linguistic, formal, thematic, and motif. He has been translated *inter alia* into English, German, Swedish, Polish, and Italian. Criticism of his books did not stop at Agnon himself (1908), but stretched back to the writings of S.Y. Tchatchkes (1904-1908), delving further than merely his creative output into the realm of personal biography itself.

This treatment poses two questions. First, is there room for further discussion of his writings? Second, what is the reason for its appeal? If we begin with the second question, it would appear that the lack of epistemological clarity has confused the critique surrounding Agnon’s oeuvre, resulting in the focusing of a never-ending discourse around it. This ninety-year-old discourse is characterized by a strenuous epistemological dichotomy between scepticism and

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1 This article is part of D. Hoshen, *Agnon’s Writing: An Additional Tier in Talmudic-Aggadic Literature*, Ph.D. dissertation, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, 2000 (hereafter referred to as “Tier”). Translated from the Hebrew by Irene Lancaster, Centre for Jewish Studies, Department of Religions and Theology, University of Manchester, UK.


3 See recently, H. Stern, *Agnon as a Linguistic Editor of his Literary Source* (Dissertation), Bar Ilan, 1996.


7 See Y. Bakon, *The Young Agnon* (Tel Aviv, 1989).

faith. At times, it has been fashionable to view Agnon’s work as falling within a traditional epistemological framework. At other times, it seemed more apt to regard it as part of the secular modernist trend. Finally, during the 1940s, Kurzweill, following Sadan, located Agnon’s oeuvre firmly within the secular realm. Nevertheless, certain religious fundamentals still provided an overt problem. This dilemma was solved by viewing them as no more than just a central stimulus for the artistic phenomenon.

Hence to the first question: the reader who wishes to take part in the discourse regarding Agnon in its dichotomous formulation must enter above all into its principal assumptions and beliefs and conclude with Y. Yitzhaki that all viable research into Agnon’s great work is very close to completion.

However, it may be difficult for some to accept the framework and its assumptions, reflected in the mass of synonyms used by all sides in this discourse. In this scenario the past is identified with the reverential (ye-re-iy), simple, whole, hasidic, calm, religious, traditional, populist and legendary etc, while the present is identified with the modernist, secular, compound, divisive, perplexed, doubting, universal, existential, impressionistic, radical, real, etc. All the textual

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9 See Tier, chap. 1, for a complete overview of Agnon criticism, centered on this dichotomous axis. The title of this dichotomy follows M. Shamir’s “S.Y. Agnon: A Skeptic or Believer?,” in Yediot Aharonot, 16/9/88, pp. 20, 25, 23/9/88, p. 29.

10 Earlier, from 1910-20, it appears that Agnon’s writings might have been totally rejected (Tier, p. 19).

11 B. Kurzweill, ‘The analysis of Pat Shlemah as an example of the decoding of Sefer ha-maf’asim’, Gazit, 4, 1942. Also see idem, Massot (Tel Aviv, 1976), pp. 86-94.


14 We use the term “assumptions,” because although they have not been discussed in literary research, they surely deserve corroboration from religious, cultural and talmudic research.

15 Ye-re-iy is mainly characterized by the linguistic signaling of compound broken verses and phrases from midrash, aggada, and Talmud. It characterizes a type of Judaism dating from the 17th century, characterized by naive faith and acknowledgement of divine judgment.

16 In Tier (chap. 1, 2), I gathered the wealth of these synonyms and sorted them by the names of their users. I claimed, using elements developed in D. Hoshen, The Fire Symbol In Talmudic-Aggadic Literature, Ph.D. dissertation, Bar Ilan, Ramat Gan 1989 (hereinafter, Fire), that they are valueless, in relation both to the biblical figures in the midrashic approach, and to the sages’ personalities themselves. Their characters are related, naturally, to the traditional canon of Judaism.