

And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight



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AND THE CROOKED  
SHALL BE MADE  
STRAIGHT

S.Y. AGNON

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW  
WITH A FOREWORD AND ANNOTATIONS BY  
MICHAEL P. KRAMER

*The Toby Press*

*And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*

by S.Y. Agnon

*Translated with a Foreword and Annotations by Michael P. Kramer*

S.Y. Agnon Library Series Editor: Jeffrey Saks

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## *Foreword*

# Agnon's Crooked Road Between Exile and Redemption

## I

S.Y. Agnon's *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*—here translated into English for the first time—is set in the eastern Galician town of Buczacz and its environs. The choice of setting is significant for a number of reasons, but I want to focus here on the biographical. As readers familiar with Agnon will no doubt know, it was in that mostly Jewish town that the author was born as Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes, about a generation or so after the fictional events related in this tale. It was in Buczacz that he was raised and educated in the traditional Jewish texts that occupy such a prominent place in the novella, and it was from that town that he made his way to Jaffa in Ottoman Palestine, where the text was written. I begin here because, for Agnon, the when and where of his birth were not simply biographical facts but literary motifs. The actual Buczacz was where he was born and raised, but the imagined Buczacz—it's the setting of many of his other writings as well—is where his characters continue to live. As for the when: his biographer affirms that he was born there on August 8, 1887 or, according to the Jewish calendar, on the

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eighteenth day of the month of Av, in the year 5647. However, this, too, was filtered through his imagination. Agnon liked to claim that his birthday was actually on the Ninth of Av 1888, and, for years, even scholars took him at his word.<sup>1</sup> It's clear now that the sly author was winking at us, telling a tale, a little fiction that hints at something significant about himself and his writing, including, I think, this novella that takes us back to the Buczacz he left—or, more precisely, to an earlier Buczacz he could only imagine. I hope to explain what I mean over the crooked course of this introduction.

Agnon knew what the date would conjure up in the minds of his readers. The day he claimed as his birthday is the darkest date in the Jewish calendar, an annual day of fasting and self-abnegation, the culmination of three weeks of national mourning over the destruction—not once, but twice—of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and the national exiles that followed. On the Ninth of Av in 587 BCE, Solomon's Temple was burned to the ground by Nebuchadnezzar, and the Jews exiled to Babylon. Some seventy years later, after Babylon had been conquered by Persia, the Jews began to return to Judea and the Temple was rebuilt. But several centuries later, in 70 CE, on that same calendar date, the Second Temple was destroyed by Titus and his Roman forces and has never been rebuilt. Embers of resistance smoldered for several generations, until Bar Kochba's rebellion against the Roman occupiers was crushed, his final stronghold in the town of Betar vanquished, the Jewish population of Judea decimated, and the Temple ruins ploughed under and profaned with idols. The Roman conquest was complete, and what became a two thousand year exile began. All these events, and their long term consequences, have been associated in Jewish tradition with the Ninth of Av.

The Sages of the Talmud perceived more than mere coincidence in the calendric congruence of these national cataclysms. They saw it as historical pattern, divine design, God's reckoning with his chosen, if stiff-necked people. Looking backward, they saw the later events already adumbrated in the story of the Exodus, at the very beginning of the national history of the Jews. On the Ninth of Av, the Israelites, whom God had redeemed from Egyptian servitude the previous year, received the disparaging report of the spies Moses had sent ahead to Canaan and

tearfully despaired of entering the Promised Land, a failure of faith and nerve that ushered in forty years of wandering in the desert, an original sin of sorts that prepared the ground for the series of national disasters that followed on that same calendar day for centuries and millennia later. The Talmud (Ta'anit 21a) tells us that when the Holy One, blessed be He, heard the wailing of the Israelites in the wilderness, He said, "Tonight you cry for no reason, so I decree that you will cry on this night for generations to come."

Many generations after the destruction of the Second Temple and its lingering aftermath, over their long history of exile and disempowerment, one calamity after another became associated in Jewish minds with the Ninth of Av: the launching of the First Crusade in 1096 and the devastation to Jewish communities that came in its wake; the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290, and then from Spain in 1492; and the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648 in Eastern Poland, briefly but poignantly recalled in the second chapter of *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*. (And in more recent times, too, the outbreak of World War I and in the second World War the fall of the Warsaw Ghetto and the Holocaust.) Whether these events actually occurred on that specific date, or merely thereabouts, is less important than the force that the symbolism of the Ninth of Av exercised over Jewish memory and imagination. Agnon recognized that the Ninth of Av was the axis upon which the tragic history of the Jews from biblical to modern times turned, and he wanted himself and his writings to be firmly located on that relentless, tearful axis.

That, but also more. For the Ninth of Av always looks in two directions at once: mournfully backward, and longingly forward. Agnon knew well the correlative rabbinic tradition that the seeds of salvation are planted in the terrain of tragedy, that the Ninth of Av is also to be the day that the Messiah will be born, a day that looks forward to the final redemption, to the return to Zion, to the rebuilding of the Holy Temple. Imaginatively shifting the year of his birth from the actual 1887 to 1888, he emerged into the world in the Jewish year 5648. In Hebrew numerology, which assigns a numeral to each letter of the alphabet, his chosen birth year becomes an anagram for the phrase, "have mercy." When Agnon claimed the Ninth of Av as his birthday, he also liked to mention that



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the year of his birth recalls Psalms 102:14: “Thou wilt arise, and *have mercy* upon Zion: for it is time to favor her, for the set time is come.”

Behind Agnon’s personal claim to the Ninth of Av lies the millennia-old story of the Jews, memorialized in the calendar and ritualized in the synagogue, a master narrative of sin and punishment, of destruction and exile, of endless wanderings ameliorated only, but insistently, by the abiding hope of ultimate redemption and return. It’s a tale that’s been told and retold, beginning in the Bible, expanded and extended in the Talmud and Midrash, elaborated in law and liturgy, and infused into an unbroken chain of texts down to Agnon’s own time. It’s a story that encompasses many stories, seared into the collective consciousness of a people, forming the implicit but inescapable backdrop of all Jewish stories and, through them, of everyday Jewish life, giving meaning to the often oppressive present and, in the words of theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, “clearing a way for understanding the future in spite of the present.”<sup>2</sup> The Ninth of Av effectually provided the spiritual underpinning and emotional impetus behind the rise of the Zionist movement at the end of the nineteenth century, the attempt to implement (in the words of “HaTikvah,” the Israeli national anthem) the “two-thousand-year-old hope” of ending the exile and “being a free nation in our land.” As such, the Ninth of Av is what brought Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes to the shores of Jaffa in 1908, and, as I hope to explain, it pervades the story of woeful wanderings he wrote four years later, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*.

It was in the narrative terms of the Ninth of Av that Agnon fashioned his literary persona when, more than a half century after he first landed in Jaffa, at the crowning moment of his literary career, he fancifully presented himself to the dignitaries in Stockholm when awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. “As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land,” he explained in his 1966 Nobel banquet speech, “I was born in one of the cities of the Exile.” Agnon’s paternal line were Levites, he told the audience, descendants of the Temple musicians and chorus, and his childhood dreams were shaped by imaginings of past glories and prophetic promises of redemption and return. “I saw myself standing with my brother-Levites in the Holy Temple,” he said, “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.” When he woke, the melodies were forgotten. No doubt the work of angels, and all for the best. Were they to hear those songs in real life, he told the distinguished audience, “my brethren, the sons of my people... would be unable to bear their grief over the happiness they have lost.” He concludes his thumbnail portrait of the artist as a young Levite in a tone that is playful but shivers with dark irony: as consolation and compensation for his loss and his longing, and by implication the loss and longing inherent in the long exilic history of the Jews, the angels enabled him to become a writer.<sup>3</sup>

To this bit of fancy, if a translator may be indulged, I will add my own fictional epilogue to Agnon’s birthday wink and suggest a direct connection between *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* and the Ninth of Av. If Agnon actually had been born on that date, the Sabbath immediately following his thirteenth birthday, his bar mitzvah, would have been *Shabbat Naḥamu*, the Sabbath of Consolation. After three weeks of ritual mourning, after sitting on the synagogue floor on the eve of the Ninth of Av and chanting the Book of Lamentations with its horrific images of Jerusalem in ruins, its litanies of loss and mourning, after reciting the next morning hours of dirges and elegies recounting the destruction of the two temples and the other communal catastrophes over the millennia—after all this, the Jews of Buczacz, still settled in their city of the Exile, turn on this Sabbath from the awful past to the unrealized but anticipated future and, with Jews all over the world, take comfort in prophetic promises of redemption. Each Sabbath morning, beside the weekly portion from the Pentateuch, a selection from the Prophets is chanted, a *haftarah*. Between the Ninth of Av and Rosh HaShanah, the *haftarah* is taken from the consolatory second part of the Book of Isaiah, beginning on *Shabbat Naḥamu* with God’s injunction to the prophet in Isaiah 40: “Comfort my people, comfort them, says your God. Speak comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry to her, that her war service is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, for she has received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” It is tempting to imagine the young Shmuel Yosef, newly initiated into manhood, sitting in synagogue that Sabbath morning, hearing, or perhaps chanting himself, these words of

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the prophet in the verses that follow: “Prepare in the wilderness the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: *and the crooked shall be made straight*, and the rough places plain: and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.”

A dozen years later, two thousand miles away, these verses provided the title for the aspiring author’s first book.

## II

Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes was still a young man—not quite twenty one years old—when he arrived in Jaffa from Buczacz in 1908, and modern Hebrew literature was still a young literature. Both were finding their way in the world. By the end of the year, Czaczkes had made a name for himself among the coterie of European-born Hebraist writers and intellectuals who had made their way to the new *yishuv*, the small but growing Jewish settlement in Palestine, part of what is known as the Second Aliyah, the wave of immigration that followed the series of violent pogroms in Eastern Europe in the early years of the new century. He made a name for himself, both figuratively and literally. When his first short story appeared in the local periodical *HaOmer*, edited by Simcha Alter Guttman (who went by the pen-name, S. Ben-Zion), it was received warmly in his circle, and he earned his first kudos as a serious writer. And, with the publication of that story, “*Agunot*” (literally, abandoned or fettered wives), Czaczkes adopted the pen-name Agnon, with its echoes of separation, loneliness, and longing. (Though the title figures only symbolically in that story, the abandoned, fettered wife is a salient element in *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*.)

Most significant among his new admirers was the Russian-Jewish writer, editor, and ardent Zionist, Yosef Chaim Brenner. The two had met briefly in Galicia and had struck up a friendship there. Seven years Agnon’s senior, Brenner was by then an established and respected literary figure, and the interest shown in the younger aspirant was no doubt flattering and welcome. Hearing that the young man from Buczacz was planning to sail to Palestine, he said to him, “Well, I suppose that there’s nothing left for a Jewish fellow to do than to go to the land of the

Jews.”<sup>4</sup> When Brenner joined Agnon in Palestine in 1909, their friendship renewed and grew. Brenner would soon play an important role in Agnon’s nascent career.

Agnon began writing *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* in Jaffa in October 1911. He claims to have composed most of it at a fever pitch, over the course of four days, and was ready to have the manuscript read in early December. It was a tale that looked away from the new *yishuv*, back to an earlier time and place, to mid-nineteenth century Buczacz, to the near-mythic eastern European world of the grandparents of the new settlers. It told of Menashe Chaim HaCohen and his wife Kreindel Charne, a childless ḥasidic couple who ran a modestly successful general store; told of their pitiable, inexorable descent into poverty; of the husband’s reluctant leaving home and his humiliating (if also often humorous) travels through the cities and towns of Galicia to gather alms for their survival; of his abandoned wife and the tragic complications that follow his delayed return. Blending the simple charm of a folk tale with the subtle sophistication of literary art, the work was roundly lauded in his little circle of enthusiasts. Soon they were arguing about how to publish it. Yehoshua Radler-Feldman, known by the pen-name Rabbi Binyamin, an influential member of the group, insisted it should be published in Warsaw. After all, Palestine was still a cultural backwater, Europe remained the center of Hebraic culture, and this was a work of importance that deserved attention. But it was decided otherwise. Between January and May, the work was printed in six installments in Yosef Aharonovitch’s local socialist-Zionist periodical *HaPoel HaTzair*. Close on its heels, the novella appeared separately as a book. The slim volume was published—as the title page has it, in “Jaffa, the Land of Israel”—personally by Agnon’s new-old friend Brenner who also financed the publication and oversaw its sale and distribution.

In a memoir he wrote about Brenner a half century later, Agnon looked back at the events that led up to the publication of the novella, and offered the following vignette:

I was a young writer then, reluctant to rely on my own judgment. Whenever I wrote a story, I showed it to S. Ben-Zion. If he thought it worth printing, I published it. If he didn’t think it worth printing,

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I buried it somewhere or tore it up. After I wrote my story *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, I went to S. Ben-Zion. He wasn't home. I went back later, and still he wasn't there. I was young then, impatient to hear what the experts might say. So I took four *metlikim*—which were worth an entire *grush*, enough to buy half a loaf of bread and a handful of olives—bought a stamp, and mailed my story to Brenner in Jerusalem. (In those days I lived in Jaffa and Brenner in Jerusalem.) Seven days later a letter from Brenner arrived with remarks about my book unlike anything any critic had ever written about me before. It also said that he wanted to publish the book himself. [I was later told that] Brenner had gathered together a group of intellectuals and writers... and read my book to them with tears in his eyes. I'm telling you this to let you know how influential Brenner was, that he was able to bring together such a group to read them the book of some fledgling author.

After a digression in which he discusses at some length Brenner's move from Jaffa to Jerusalem, Agnon returns to the story of the book's publication:

I forgot to mention that Brenner had added on the envelope that, because he was unable to buy a stamp, "the letter was delayed in my pocket for seven days." Usually publishers are richer than authors. In those days I was richer than the publisher. I was able to buy a stamp, but the publisher had to wait seven days to find a single *grush* to buy a stamp.... Brenner [said that he wanted to publish the book, but he] had no money. Whenever some money found its way to him, he spent less than a third on himself, on his personal needs, and the rest on others. So what did he do? He borrowed some money.... Still, when the printing of the story was just about done, he realized he'd made a mistake in his computations and he needed four or five more francs.

It was not a large volume. "The entire book, in octavo, including title page, fly leaves, and errata sheet, ran to sixty eight pages," but Brenner still was short of funds, "and he didn't want to borrow any more."

Just about that time, Agnon goes on to tell us, he settled his affairs in Jaffa and moved to Jerusalem as well. He found a place to stay, dropped off his things, and went to visit Brenner, who hadn't yet gathered the remainder of the money he needed. His friend's apartment, he writes, was sparsely furnished, "small but full of light." After a modest dinner of bread, cheese, olives, and hot cocoa, Brenner says, "Come, I'll show you Jerusalem." Agnon continues:

Just as we were leaving, he went back into his room. When he came out I noticed that he was hiding something in his hand. Not being one to pry, I didn't ask him, "What's that in your hand?" We walked some and talked some, till he stopped and entered one of those shops near Jaffa Gate. "Come with me," he said. I followed him in. He put the object down in front of the shopkeeper. "*Ir muzt mir moykhl zayn,*" he said to him [in Yiddish], "*kh'darf di tsvey bishlikes fun maynet vegn.*" Meaning: "Forgive me, sir, but I need those two coins for a personal matter." The shopkeeper nodded and said, "A man must never change his custom." Then he gave him back his money. So what was the meaning of, "I need those two coins for a personal matter"? And what was the meaning of, "A man must never change his custom"? Brenner always belted his pants with a leather strap. When his strap wore out and he needed to buy a new one, someone persuaded him to buy suspenders like everyone else in the *yishuv*. Now that he needed four or five francs to publish a Hebrew book, he returned the suspenders to the shopkeeper and once again belted his pants with his old, worn strap. I ask you, have you ever known a man so willing to sacrifice for someone else's book?

Agnon closes this episode of his memoir of Brenner with the older author's bringing him a review of the novella by the respected literary critic Fischel Lachower, writing from Warsaw. "I sat and read the article with Brenner standing over me, watching my expression," he recalled. "When I finished, he said, 'So what do you say about that? I've never had such a good review written about me!' He never had, yet he was

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happy that I did. Such generosity is not found in many, let alone among those who toil at the same craft, even less so when one is junior, the other senior.”<sup>5</sup>

### III

Agnon’s charming little vignette elides more than it reveals about the origins and impact of *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*. We hear of the generosity of spirit that motivated Brenner, and sense the powerful ambition tucked beneath Agnon’s faux-humble tone. It tells us something of the stark, pioneering conditions in the new *yishuv*, and of the idealism that buoyed the writers and intellectuals intent on creating something new in the world, a modern literature in an ancient language. But what was it about the story of Menashe Chaim and Kreindel Charne that moved them?

Lachower’s effusive review tells us more. What had drawn the critic to the novella, what had made it stand out for him from most other works of modern Hebrew literature then being written, was one quality in particular, its pervasive sense of a longstanding, rooted, perpetually relevant Jewish literary tradition. The novella’s style was not a mimicking or parodying of a Jewish folk style, he wrote, and it did not simply appropriate and exploit Jewish materials. Lachower saw in it something more, something deeper, something genuine. “S.Y. Agnon is one of those writers who has absorbed much from the spirit of the people,” he wrote, “and he is faithful to the House of Israel and its literature.” The book, he explained, was “a treasure trove of Jewish legends, parables, modes of speech and thought, of gesture and expression,” bits and pieces of all sorts of Jewish books, from the Bible and Talmud to popular pious tracts and ḥasidic tales, all drawn together in a creative, unified style that was at once both the author’s own and the nation’s. He heard in the sad story of Menashe Chaim and Kreindel Charne “a truly Jewish sigh,” the sort that “might break even those hearts that have turned to stone and call forth an echo from deep inside them.” It was a work that played on the people’s most delicate, intimate heartstrings, an ancient tune that was the nation’s ineradicable inheritance. “This little book,” Lachower concluded, “is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful works produced in our literature in recent years.”<sup>6</sup>

*And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* was instantly recognized as a literary work that flowed from the sources, that embodied the Jewish national spirit. Before publication, Agnon had shared the manuscript with Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the great scholar and theologian, deeply admired by Agnon, who was then serving as chief rabbi of Jaffa. Upon returning it, as Agnon recalled, the great rabbi told him, “This is an authentic Hebrew story flowing unimpeded through the divine channels.”<sup>7</sup> The volume’s typesetter, a devout Breslover, similarly read the tale as the “true embodiment of hasidic lore and spirit.”<sup>8</sup> The Warsaw critic clearly agreed, if he valued the quality for a somewhat different reason. Lachower’s enthusiasm for Agnon’s novella resonates with a cultural nationalism that was gaining popularity in Europe and America at the turn of the twentieth century, including among the Jews. It was an ideology that could trace its origins to the German Romantic philosophy of Johann Gottfried von Herder, the belief that each nation had its own unique spiritual qualities, its *volksgeist*, and that it was incumbent upon the people of that nation to strive to develop its inherent particularity for its own spiritual health and development. In the years immediately prior to the publication of *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, the most eloquent proponents of a Jewish cultural renaissance included Aḥad HaAm in Russia and Martin Buber in Germany. The two thinkers similarly saw the Jewish world in crisis after the failures of political emancipation to solve what became known as the Jewish Problem. A series of events—the formation of anti-Semitic parties in western Europe, the pogroms in Russia, the Dreyfus trial in France—had dampened dreams of political and social normalization for Jews and led to (among other phenomena, such as the mass immigration to America) the rise of modern Zionism. But it was not the political danger, however threatening, that attracted the attention and stoked the passion of Aḥad HaAm and Buber.<sup>9</sup> More worrying to them was the cultural attenuation that rose up to greet the promises of Emancipation and Enlightenment, “the conscious and deliberate neglect of our original spiritual qualities and the striving to be like other people in every possible way.” They found the major movements in contemporary Judaism—the rise of religious reform and its shunting aside of tradition; the universalizing and rationalizing tendencies of the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment; the



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development of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement with its study of Jewish texts as artifacts, not as living expressions of the Jewish spirit; even purely political Zionism which sought only to create a refuge from anti-Semitism, not to cultivate Jewish culture; let alone the crass bourgeoisification of Jewish society and the stark extreme of assimilationism and conversion—they found these developments arid, sterile, and meaningless, betrayals of the nation's genius, threats to Jewish survival. "Our national spirit is perishing, and not a word is said," Ahad HaAm told a general meeting of Zionists in Minsk in 1902, "our national heritage is coming to an end before our very eyes, and we are silent." Wielding a particularly apt Jewish metaphor, Buber admonished the students of the Bar-Kochba Association in Prague in a lecture series published in 1911 that the Jewish world was now a spiritual desert, and the Jews were lost in it. "As a desert generation we wander about," he warned, "not knowing whereto."

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Jews had begun to produce a modern, secular literature in various European vernaculars, in German, French, and English, as well as in Yiddish and Hebrew. But these failed to impress the likes of Ahad HaAm and Buber. The literature then being written by Jews, even in Hebrew, "remains a barren field for dullards and mediocrities to trample on," Ahad HaAm complained. "From the beginning of modern Hebrew literature to the present day we have produced scarce one original book to which we could point as an individual expression of our national spirit." Neither man wanted to jettison modernity and to return to the pious ways of the past. Both Ahad HaAm and Buber rejected Orthodoxy *per se*. Still, they each pointed to the spiritual world of the eastern European Jews, and in particular to the efflorescence of Hasidism, as a model of cultural authenticity. "If we wish to find even the shadow of an original literature in the modern period," admitted Ahad HaAm, "we have to turn to the literature of Hasidism, which, with all its follies, has here and there a profound idea, stamped with the hall-mark of Hebrew originality." (Buber's attraction to Hasidism is well known; the first of his books on the subject, his retelling of the tales of Rabbi Naḥman of Breslov, was published in 1906.) They believed that a spiritual revival was possible, that a renewal of Judaism was waiting in the wings, that it was incumbent upon their generation

to reconnect in a vital, positive way with its heritage, to cultivate the Jewish *volksgeist*, to find its way out of the desert. Following through on his desert metaphor, Buber ended his address with the prophet Isaiah's rousing words from the *haftarah* for *Shabbat Naḥamu*, with the voice crying, "Prepare in the wilderness the way of the Lord!"

The year after Buber's lectures appeared in print in Frankfurt am Main, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* appeared on Fischel Lachower's desk in Warsaw.

#### IV

When he arrived in Jaffa from Buczacz, the young writer was one of many idealistic young men who had come from eastern Europe during the Second Aliyah, leaving the exile and the mournful legacy of the Ninth of Av behind in order to build a Jewish homeland and to rebuild themselves, believing they could make the crooked straight. Like the immigrants to America of the same era who, as legend has it, threw their tefillin overboard before they reached the dock at Ellis Island, these young men had largely abandoned religious practice and were deliberately living lives far different from those of their parents, and, to some degree, Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes was like them in this, too. And yet, as Agnon described that milieu in his novel *Only Yesterday* (1945), the break with the past was not emphatic, not without something like longing for home. "In those days," he writes, "Jaffa was full of young men who had once studied the holy books and the commentaries." Once, but no longer. Still, they "felt pangs in their hearts." Something was missing. Here they were in Palestine, but they did not sing the songs of Zion, as did the previous generation. In fact, "those songs set their teeth on edge." Agnon explains: "when the soul yearns, it returns to look for what it has lost." In Europe they yearned for Zion; in Palestine they yearned for the world they left behind. So when the young men gathered together, "they sweetened their gathering with hasidic tales and melodies and with little sermons." Anyone who came from a hasidic background and had a decent singing voice "sang the tunes he'd brought from his home town, and anyone who could tell tales, told them." Those "who knew little about the hasidim," who came from areas where the popular mystical movement was vehemently opposed, contributed as well. They "turned themselves

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into preachers and preached sermons.” Remarkably, all the communal antagonisms of the Old World floated away. “The sons of the *mitnagdim* [the opponents of Hasidism] took pleasure in the tales of the hasidim, and the sons of the hasidim took pleasure in the sermons.” In fact, Agnon writes with a wink, “they didn’t much care what was authentic and what was made up.” What they wanted, what they needed, he suggests, was “to be spiritually roused.”<sup>10</sup>

These were not necessarily the followers of Aḥad HaAm and Buber. The young men of Jaffa whom Agnon is describing were not committed ideologically to a spiritual revival, to the renewal of Judaism. They harbored an unarticulated, hardly understood nostalgia, the soul’s yearning for what it has lost but does not really want to find. The songs and tales and sermons are pleasurable to the young men precisely because the world from which they emerged is safely at a distance. They no longer define and delimit them, but remain relevant to their lives in newly discovered and significant ways. The men re-appropriate traditional modes of discourse to fulfill an emotional need different from the needs they originally were meant to address, not to shore up faith but to ease the loss of faith, to soothe the ambivalence of their uprooting, of their break with the past and their entry into modernity. Had the polemicists been at the gathering in Jaffa, though, they surely would have smiled.

Perhaps this was the local audience, beyond his coterie of admirers, beyond the cultural nationalists in Europe, that Agnon had in mind when he wrote *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*. No doubt they could have read it with pleasure. But Agnon’s relationship to “the holy books and the commentaries” was of a different order than that of the young men he depicts bandying tunes and tales among themselves. It was something other than nostalgia, something more than a balm for ambivalence. In his memoir of Brenner, Agnon recalls that his friend—who, like the fellows he describes in *Only Yesterday*, had studied the Torah assiduously in his youth but had totally abandoned it by the time the two had met—happened upon Agnon once during their early days together in Jaffa when he was engrossed in studying a volume of the Talmud, discussing it with himself “out loud, with passion and affection.” Brenner says to the young writer, “I’ve been

standing here a quarter hour, flabbergasted at what brings an old fool such as yourself such satisfaction.”<sup>11</sup> Agnon was no fool, as Brenner well knew, but the anecdote tells something about the intensity of Agnon’s attraction to the holy books and his friend’s aversion to them, and to religion in general. So it cannot have been a nostalgic yearning for what he’d lost that brought tears to Brenner’s eyes when he read aloud the manuscript of *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* to his acquaintances in Jerusalem some two years later, or a commitment to a renewal of Judaism that led him to relinquish his suspenders in order to publish the tale between hard covers. Of course, we cannot discount the poignancy of the story itself, the fatality in human frailty, the tenderness tainted by sorrow and sacrifice, the heroism mired in guilt. Yet I cannot help thinking that there was also something else about the manuscript—in which, as both Lachower and Rabbi Kook observed with satisfaction, Agnon’s thorough immersion in the range of religious texts, ancient, medieval, and modern, is so conspicuous and so central—that deeply impressed and moved the older writer.

## V

Lionel Trilling once wrote that the great aesthetic and moral challenge of the modern novel was to represent in language the full, lived reality of a particular society. The novelist must render with fidelity the appearance of things: where people live, where they travel, how they dress, act, and speak, the choices they make and don’t make. But he also must capture, or at least hint at, that “culture’s hum and buzz of implication,” by which he meant “the whole evanescent context in which its explicit statements are made,” the constellation of values and assumptions that underlie and give meaning to what the members of that society, and the characters in a novel, feel and do and say. For early Hebrew fiction writers, Robert Alter has suggested, the representation of reality was particularly, even doubly challenging because they had “to constitute a whole world in a language not actually spoken in the real-life equivalent of that world.” Hebrew had been a literary language for millennia, but at the beginning of the twentieth century it was only just beginning to develop into the rich spoken language it is today. By choosing to create modern fiction in Hebrew, Alter writes, authors had to proceed “as if it were really spoken,

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as if a persuasive illusion of reality could be conveyed through a purely literary language.” As if, in Trilling’s terms, a culture’s hum and buzz of implication could be heard behind words never spoken.<sup>12</sup>

In mid-nineteenth century Buczacz, the language that would have been spoken by Menashe Chaim and Kreindel Charne was Yiddish, not Hebrew. There was not then, nor during Agnon’s own time in Buczacz, nor even in the new *yishuv*, an adequate equivalent in Hebrew for the way they might have conversed with each other or thought to themselves. Agnon minimizes this dissonance by creating a stylized text that is unabashedly literary, a text that does not strive to create a “persuasive illusion of reality” but looks and sounds like the sacred texts his characters (and those young men in Jaffa, their parents, and grandparents) might have read. Gershom Scholem observed that Agnon’s first novella “is written not so much in the style of the old devotional books as in the style their authors would have used had they been great artists.”<sup>13</sup> Allowing for hyperbole, the point is well-taken. *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* is a narrative whose characters are more highly developed versions of figures who might have stepped out of those pious Hebrew works, a fiction whose underlying assumption is that the intellectual and moral world through which its characters move is a world shaped and sustained largely by those books, that their culture’s hum and buzz of implication may be located in their pages. We see, simply on the level of plot, that Kreindel Charne goes off to work with a coal pot and her thick prayer book, and when Menashe Chaim takes to the road, we learn of his wife’s daily practice of reciting Psalms. We read of Menashe Chaim’s going to the house of study to pray and hear the word of the Lord, of his time and again picking up sacred books to peruse, of his nodding off over a book in his shop, of his fluency in the corpus of ḥasidic tales and commentary with which he entertains his hosts along his travels. We are introduced to the legal codes that the great rabbi of Buczacz consults when he needs to rule on the knotty and fateful question of whether or not the abandoned and fettered Kreindel Charne may be free to remarry. Throughout the narrative we find the characters quoting the holy books, if sometimes incorrectly, and we even meet (with frightful consequences for Menashe Chaim) a devilish beggar who can cite scripture for his own purpose. While their spoken language would

no doubt have been Yiddish, the minds and imaginations of Agnon's characters are suffused and defined by the law and lore of a plethora of texts written by and large in Hebrew.

So, too, Agnon's narrator. His point of view is objective and omniscient: he knows what his characters are thinking, knows their hopes and fears, their flaws and limitations. He reveals their secrets, their dissemblings and their self-deceptions. He can be critical, he can be compassionate. He can poke fun. (There's much humor in this tragic tale.) He offers moralizing asides to the reader while being a master of irony. But while he stands apart from his characters, he nevertheless inhabits their imaginative world. His omniscience is expressed from beginning to end, from title to epilogue, in the language of the holy books. The narrator appropriates whole passages from these texts to help him move the narrative forward. Most obvious, mimicking ethical works that would have been well-known to the characters, each chapter begins with an epigraph from the moral teachings of the rabbis, from ancient, medieval, and modern texts—on the inconstancy of money, on the trials of the poor, on the evils of wanton carnal pleasures, on sin and divine retribution, on penance and the possibility of redemption—epigraphs that together frame the tale and chart the spiritual trajectory of the characters, particularly that of the central character, Menashe Chaim. In addition to this familiar authorial device, as several scholars have shown, the narrative fabric itself is woven with strands from the holy books—or, at times, sewn together like a patchwork quilt.<sup>14</sup> In the poetic précis that opens chapter one, Agnon writes, "One tale inside another, hence this chapter is particularly long." The reference is to two long interpolated hasidic tales: the first, about the Baal Shem Tov and the tavern keeper, with a *deus ex machina* ending, concerns the miraculous power of faith; the second, about the Maggid of Kozhnitz and the thief, darkly suggests that a descent into sin and degradation may pave an approved path to salvation. Each bears crucially upon the lives and choices of the characters, and both are lifted verbatim from popular collections of hasidic tales, two thousand words and more, with minimal if any intervention from Agnon. And in the précis before chapter two, the author writes (perhaps with a wink and nod to that gathering of nostalgic young men in Jaffa): "Also included are bits of Torah wisdom and moral lessons best

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not to skip over, as this generation is wont to do.” Here the reference is most immediately to the “learned words of Torah” and the “tales of the hasidic masters,” mostly on the subject of hospitality, with which Menashe Chaim entertains his hosts while on his mendicant meanderings through Galicia—all lifted verbatim and inserted into the narrator’s text. The truth is, interpolations of all sorts are incorporated throughout the novella, from the Bible, the Talmud, the Midrash, as well as hasidic and other works—some long passages, some short allusions; some in the voice of a character, some in the narrator’s voice; some sources acknowledged, some not—Agnon’s own prose capable of blending seamlessly into that of his borrowings. Or, perhaps better, emerging out of them and enfolding them into itself.

We might call this aspect of Agnon’s style the art of interpolation. The fundamental dynamic of this narrative strategy is an intricate point and counterpoint through which the narrator highlights ironies and makes moral observations, and through which the drama of the lives of Menashe Chaim and Kreindel Charne unfolds, a play of expectations rooted in the holy texts and the challenges brought on by the vicissitudes of life. To give a particularly stark example: as soon as the narrative begins, we are told (with allusions to Leviticus and Proverbs) that Menashe Chaim “lived with his wife Kreindel Charne, with whom God had graced him in his youth, and together with his wife ate his fill of bread and pursued righteousness and mercy all his days.” The hero may not be rich and powerful but is nevertheless a model of biblical rectitude and reward. Indeed, he is said to be the true embodiment of “the maxim of the Sages of blessed memory, ‘Who does righteousness at all times? He who supports his wife and children.’” But the interpolated maxim (itself a gloss on a verse in Psalms) is immediately and doubly undercut. We are told first that Menashe Chaim has no children to support and then that, in truth, he doesn’t actually support his wife either, she supports him. Point, counterpoint. In the sentences that follow, as the narrator begins to move the story forward, the contrapuntal pattern is reiterated, even more clearly, again through allusions to various biblical verses and talmudic sayings. Point: “Ordinarily, such a man expects to dwell with his wife in peace and tranquility, to spend his days pleasurably enjoying the good of the earth, and, when his appointed time comes,

after a hundred and twenty years, to behold the splendor of the Lord.” Counterpoint: “Alas, when it pleases God to subvert a man’s ways, good fortune swiftly takes wing, and the Omnipresent has many emissaries to fling a man down upon the dunghill of need.”

Man expects, God subverts. And God indeed has many emissaries, both external and internal, devils without and devils within, that test the faith of the heroes and propel the narrative along the crooked path that leads toward its tangled, melancholy conclusion: a greedy competitor, corrupt government officials, unscrupulous moneylenders, a natural disaster, closefisted or indifferent townspeople, a demonic beggar, a carnivalesque fair, a mistaken if well-meaning rabbi, and a litany of all-too-human frailties—pride and shame, inaction and inertia, temptation and moral weakness. Yet, even as they sink into the mire of poverty, even as they teeter on the brink of despair, the characters return again and again to the texts that disappoint them. They cling to them, are buoyed by them, and, Job-like, never question the righteousness of God’s ways. (All longsuffering characters may seem Job-like, but there are also dozens of allusions to the Book of Job throughout the novella, as critics have pointed out.<sup>15</sup>) Even as Menashe Chaim confronts the enormity of his actions and their unspeakable consequences, even as he knowingly defies God’s law and despairs of miracle-working rabbis, he embraces his guilt *as guilt* and submits to his suffering as divine retribution, as penance. Menashe Chaim and Kreindel Charne cannot imagine a world outside the holy texts, without ultimate justice, without God.

Nor does the narrator provide them or us with an alternative point of view. (Though some readers may bring their own.) I am not suggesting that Agnon wholly shares the mentalité of his characters. But he hears the hum and buzz of their world. They resonate in his imagination, and readers are asked, in effect, to suspend disbelief. The chain of increasingly complex iterations of the contrapuntal pattern should not be seen, I think, as a cynical debunking of religious naiveté as much as an articulation of religious realism and resilience, of the irony inherent in belief. “There are many devices in a man’s heart,” the Bible tells us, “but the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand” (Proverbs 19:21). Man expects, God subverts. *Der mensch trakht un Gott lacht*. The faithful know that not every story has a happy ending. But they also know that their faith must



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not be dependent upon circumstance. So, too, the narrator. “Even with a sharp sword at his throat, a man should not lose faith,” he moralizes after recounting the tale of the Baal Shem Tov and the tavern-keeper. Then, when Menashe Chaim finally turns homeward at the close of chapter two, he asks rhetorically: “But, oh, who is wise enough to predict the workings of Him who is perfect in knowledge, who makes desolations in the earth yet fortifies the foundations of man?” *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* takes place within this paradox of piety. Agnon knows that to represent the world of his characters, to render the full heft of their troubles and the pathos of their predicament—that if he wants to make us cry for Menashe Chaim and Kreindel Charne, he must be faithful to the contrapuntal hum and buzz of their world.

## VI

Before I conclude, a few parenthetical words about the most subtle element in Agnon’s interpolative technique, his masterful use of allusion. Since Hebrew was not yet a fully developed modern language, as Alter notes, writers often had to turn as a matter of course to the Bible and to other holy books for an appropriate word or phrase. But Agnon uses these ancient texts not only as a lexicon but as a many-hued palette, as a way of lending historical, cultural and emotional depth to his narrative canvas by adding shades and shadows of other tales that make it shimmer with nuance, irony, and pathos. For a translator, these are the most difficult writerly effects to reproduce in another language. Here is how Cynthia Ozick describes the problem:

For decades, Agnon scholars ... have insisted that it is no use trying to get at Agnon in any language other than the original. The idea of Agnon in translation has been repeatedly disparaged; he has been declared inaccessible to the uninitiated even beyond the usual truisms concerning the practical difficulties of translation. His scriptural and Talmudic resonances and nuances, his historical and textual layers, his allusive and elusive echoes and patternings, are so marvelously multiform, dense, and imbricated that he is daunting even to the most sophisticated Hebrew readers.<sup>16</sup>

Interpolated texts and passages in *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* may be translated and their functions in the narrative reproduced, at least to a significant degree, as I've tried to explain above. We can understand, for example, how the tale of the Baal Shem Tov and the tavern-keeper is echoed ironically in what befalls Menashe Chaim and Kreindel Charne immediately afterward when a surly, whip-bearing villager enters their shop. The narrator makes clear how the Maggid of Kozhnitz's advice to his disciple impacts Menashe Chaim's agonizing decision to turn to begging. These tales of pious Jews in dire need are before us, and we can compare and contrast them to each other (they differ significantly, and are far from simple in themselves) and to Agnon's story. But even to catch (let alone translate) the "allusive and elusive echoings and patternings" that occur at the level of language demands a sensitive, educated palate, an ideal reader who has attained a level of cultural and linguistic literacy that matches Agnon's own.

No mean feat. Knowing what a word or phrase means when used by Agnon includes recognizing how it means, and, for a translator, that often entails discovering where it came from and what it brings with it. I will offer here three brief and basic examples, each from a different biblical story, each employed for a somewhat different effect.

1. When we first meet Menashe Chaim, we are told that he was neither rich and powerful nor had he "found his place among the nation's notables." The phrase I have rendered as "found his place" literally translates as "nor shall his place know him," an unusual biblical-sounding locution that even in Hebrew might give a reader pause. The choice of phrase was, however, very deliberate, the first of Agnon's many allusions to Job: "As the cloud is consumed and vanishes away, so he who goes down to the grave shall come up no more. He shall return no more to his house, nor shall his place know him any more" (6:9-10). A reader with whom this source resonates might rightly shudder, wondering if and how this allusion foreshadows what is to come.
2. A few lines later, when we are told that Menashe Chaim is childless, the Hebrew word the author chooses for "childless," *'ariri*, appears very rarely in the Bible but would echo familiarly to many

readers as the word used by an octogenarian Abraham when he complains to the Lord of his childlessness and is then promised that “he that shall come forth out of they own body shall be thy heir” (Genesis 15:2-5). Even one familiar with the biblical text might doubt this usage is at all significant. But later in the chapter, Abraham reappears when Menashe Chaim decides that begging is his only remaining alternative and, the narrator tells us, he applies to himself God’s command to the patriarch, “Get thee out of thy country” (Genesis 12:1), which is followed in the Bible by the Lord’s promise that He would make Abraham into a great nation. A pattern may be emerging. Soon after, when he prepares to take to the road to solicit alms, he says to his wife, “I will surely return to you,” the exact phrase that the angel uses when he tells a nonagenarian Abraham, “I will certainly return to thee at this season; and lo, Sara thy wife shall have a son” (Genesis 18:10). By now Agnon’s reader is implicitly speculating, “How might these allusions to the archetypal childless-man-turned-patriarch play out? Will there be a child in the end?”

3. When Menashe Chaim and Kreindel Charne are forced to abandon their shop, we read that “by habit, Menashe Chaim lifted his two wounded fingers to kiss the mezuzah, stroked the empty space where it had been [on the doorpost], kissed his fingers, and, distraught and distracted, aggravated his wound.” The verb chosen by Agnon for what I’ve translated as “stroked” appears in this form only once in the Bible, when the blinded Samson “took hold of” the two pillars that held up the Philistine temple where he is brought in mockery and, in a powerful act of revenge, brings the building crashing down upon himself and his captors (Judges 15:29-31). The attentive reader smiles at the ironic contrast of the heroic Samson to the defeated, all-but-heroic Menashe Chaim, but the example of victory in defeat and death causes her to raise an eyebrow. Later, echoes of the story of Samson return. After the till-then-barren wife of Manoah gives birth to Samson, the Bible narrates, “the child grew, and the Lord blessed him. And the spirit of the Lord began to move him through the camp of Dan” (Judges 13:25). When Menashe Chaim goes to the Fair at Lashkovitz hoping to conduct some business after several difficult years of begging, suddenly “the winds [in Hebrew, the same word

as “spirit”] of success began to propel him through the merchants’ camp, everyone tossing him some small coin just to be rid of him.” Another sad smile.

The terrible sufferings of Job, the prolonged childlessness of Abraham, the tragic heroism of Samson: these are only a very few of the myriad of “allusive and elusive echoings and patternings” that are woven into the iridescent fabric of Agnon’s prose in *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*—from the Bible, the Talmud, and later works. Most are transparent to readers of the translated text—if not to many contemporary Hebrew readers as well. While it is hoped that this translation of Agnon’s novella will provide a rewarding reading on its own, I have also provided for interested readers a separate, copious section of notes and brief commentaries that appears after the story itself, keyed to the relevant phrases in the text. I believe they can provide a hint (or more) of the young Agnon’s mastery of the corpus of Jewish literature and of the exquisite, intricate art he was developing, the art of Jewish storytelling that so impressed Rabbi Kook and Fischel Lachower and, perhaps, brought tears to the eyes of Yosef Chaim Brenner.

## VII

I suggested at the outset that, of all the legends and all the lore that played through Agnon’s imagination while he was writing *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, of all the allusions that are woven into the fabric of the text, the stories of exile and longed-for return whose conjoint signifier is the Ninth of Av hold a special place, as it does in Agnon’s enduring sense of himself as a writer. To this I return, and with this I will conclude.

It is, of course, the title of the novella, resonant of its place in the *haftarah* for *Shabbat Nahamu*, that brings the Ninth of Av to the fore and sets the tone of the novella. “Comfort my people, comfort them, says your God”: after the destruction of the Second Temple, confronting a troubling new historical reality, an exile that saw no imminent path home, the Sages found in the prophet’s message something more far-reaching, protracted, and perpetually (if sadly) relevant. Noting that the phrase “says your God” is actually written in the future tense (literally, “your God *will* say”), the Midrash elaborates: when the prophet Isaiah came

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to the people of Israel to console them, to report that the Babylonian exile would end, the people asked him, “Rabbi Isaiah, do you mean to say that you have come to comfort specifically this generation in which the Holy Temple has been destroyed?” He responds, “I have come for all generations,” that is to say, for all who suffer the depredations and deprivations of exile down through the centuries, including all those who continued to live, as Agnon writes in the opening lines of the novella, in “the scattered communities of Israel.”<sup>17</sup> The Midrash also suggests that, when it eventually comes, the final return to Zion will be like a second exodus from Egypt, with clouds of glory surrounding the Children of Israel, above their heads and beneath their feet, filling the ditches, flattening the ridges, making the crooked roads straight.<sup>18</sup> By choosing his title, Agnon suggests ironically that Isaiah had come, too, for Menashe Chaim HaCohen of Buczacz, wandering waywardly, exiled from home and wife on the crooked roads of Galicia.

Ironically, because Menashe Chaim is not, strictly speaking, in exile. He is on an errand. He can return at any point, though he does not. But it is nonetheless exile that hums and buzzes in his mind and in the mind of his wife, Kreindel Charne. When Menashe Chaim makes the difficult decision to leave, Agnon writes, Kreindel Charne prepares for her husband “the gear he needed for exile,” pointedly using language from Ezekiel (12:3), when the Lord commands the prophet to impress upon the Jews in Babylon the stark reality of their fate. As he travels on, delaying his return again and again, Menashe Chaim becomes “convinced that in God’s eyes he endures exile for His sake alone, may His name be blessed,” deluding himself that, as the Kabbalah suggests of the faithful Children of Israel, he will eventually be rewarded for his righteous sufferings. When he thinks of his wife at another family’s Sabbath table, he even imagines that she, too, “has been exiled.” For her part, the impoverished Kreindel Charne “recalled those earlier days, sitting like a noblewoman in her shop, a princess among the merchants,” Agnon’s language echoing the opening of the Book of Lamentations, where a Jerusalem in ruins is compared to a widow who once “was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces.” Again and again, Agnon deftly uses language from the Book of Lamentations, and Jeremiah, and Isaiah, and Ezekiel, coloring his narrative with the somber hues of the Ninth of Av.

Yet the Ninth of Av itself is never mentioned explicitly in the novella. For that matter, neither are the other fast days and holidays that mark the Jewish calendar and have provided a steady rhythm for the lives of Jews for millennia, or they're referred to only in passing. We are told pointedly that Menashe Chaim leaves Buczacz when "a thick brown fog, the fog of the month of Elul, spreads its wings over the woods and blankets the open fields, and the white tombstones glint in the graveyard." Elul is the month that directly follows the month of Av and, even more significantly, directly precedes the Days of Awe, the period that extends from the Jewish New Year to the Day of Atonement, the holiest days of the Jewish calendar, when the Lord sits in judgment and decides the fate of the world—who will live and who will die, who will pass away and who will be born, who will rest and who will wander—and Jews everywhere sit in synagogues for hours on end beseeching the Lord for mercy. The pious and desperately poor Menashe Chaim would not have missed these holy days, nor could he have in the communities through which he travels. Yet, curiously, this is precisely when he leaves home. Allusions to the chants and prayers unique to the Days of Awe are interspersed throughout the narrative (notably at the very end, and in a graveyard), but Agnon is otherwise strangely silent on the matter, as if Menashe Chaim's wanderings and Kreindel Charne's abandonment take them out of calendrical and historical time, to some foggy, timeless realm of incessant exile and an eternal anticipation of redemption and return, suspended between an unmentioned Ninth of Av and a Day of Judgment that is yet to arrive, when the crooked shall finally, finally be made straight.

Besides the linkage to the Exodus, the Midrash also offers another powerful interpretation of the verse "and the crooked shall be made straight" by linking it to a passage in Jeremiah: "The heart is deceitful [literally, crooked] above all things, and grievously weak, who can know it? I, the Lord, search the heart, I try the inward parts, even to give every man according to his ways and according to the fruit of his doings" (17:9-10). The roots of exile lie within. The Omnipresent may have many emissaries to fling a man down upon the dunghill of need, but ultimately it's Menashe Chaim's heart that is responsible for his exile from Buczacz and from Kreindel Charne, his passivity and timidity, his impotence, his inveterate inability

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to assert himself and act. His weak and crooked heart. From the very start, it is Kreindel Charne, “his helpmeet,” who “put all her efforts into running their business, presiding over everything that had to do with the shop.” Eventually, Menashe Chaim becomes *her* helpmeet. He is browbeaten by his wife, jostled by crowds, inveigled by a devilish stranger, enticed by earthly delights. Even his climactic gesture of defiance and devotion, as noble and courageous as we may see it, is at the same time (if not essentially) a decision not to act, to avoid the responsibility placed upon him by Jewish law, to remain on the crooked path of exile, between the Ninth of Av and the Day of Judgment. If the ironic, bittersweet conclusion toward which the narrative twists provides narrative closure, the crooked has been made straight in a manner the childless couple could not have predicted and would not have wanted.

Perhaps it should not surprise us, then, that Menashe Chaim really takes center stage in the novella only after he leaves Buczacz and Kreindel Charne, when he warms to his wanderings and becomes, not a successful beggar, but a welcome, itinerant storyteller, regaling his hosts with topical witticisms, “learned words of Torah,” and “tales of the hasidic masters.” (His final act, just as the curtain is about to fall, is also an act of storytelling.) Nor should it surprise us that, writing from the Land of Israel, from the land of the two thousand year old hope, Agnon finds inspiration in what he left behind, in Buczacz, in the Ninth of Av, in a world of suffering and exile mediated by a salvation and redemption still beyond reach, in a crooked road that has not yet been made straight.

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Michael P. Kramer  
Hanukah 5777/2016  
*The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of  
Agnon's Nobel Prize*

## NOTES

- 1 See Dan Laor, *S.Y. Agnon: A Biography* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998). I've relied throughout for biographical detail on this volume, as well as on Laor's essay, "The Story Behind Agnon's First Work" [Hebrew], *Haaretz* (September 13, 2013). For examples of scholars who took Agnon at his word, see Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 5, and Gershon Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York and London: New York University Press, 1989), p. 3.
- 2 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 145.
- 3 A translation of Agnon's Nobel address can be found in *Forevermore & Other Stories* (New Milford, CT: The Toby Press, 2016), pp. 264-269.
- 4 Laor, *S.Y. Agnon*, p. 45.
- 5 The memoir of Brenner may be found in Hebrew in S.Y. Agnon, "Yosef Chaim Brenner, in Life and Death," *MeAtzmi el Atzmi* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishers, 2000), pp. 115-147.
- 6 Lachower's review is reprinted in Yehuda Friedlander, ed., *On "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight": Essays on S.Y. Agnon's Novella* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1993), pp. 13-19.
- 7 Quoted in Agnon's memoir of R. Kook in *MeAtzmi el Atzmi*, p. 201.
- 8 Gershom Scholem, "S.Y. Agnon—The Last Hebrew Classic?," in Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays*, ed. Werner J. Dannhauser (New York: Schocken, 1976), p. 99.
- 9 See "The Spiritual Revival" in *Selected Essays by Ahad Ha-am*, ed. and trans. Leon Simon (New York: Atheneum, 1972), pp. 253-305, and Martin Buber, "Renewal of Judaism" in his *On Judaism*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1967), pp. 34-55.



## Foreword

- 10 Agnon, *Tmol Shilshom* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishers, 1998), pp. 63-64 (my translation). The novel was translated by Barbara Harshav as *Only Yesterday* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- 11 *MeAtzmi el Atzmi*, p. 126.
- 12 Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," in his *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2008), pp. 205-222; and Robert Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose: Modern Fiction and the Language of Realism* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1988), p. 5.
- 13 Scholem, "S.Y. Agnon—The Last Hebrew Classic?," p. 99.
- 14 See, e.g., the essays by Dov Landau, Louis Landau, Gedalia Nagel and Yehuda Friedlander in *On "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight."*
- 15 See, for instance, the essay by Hillel Weiss in Friedlander, esp. pp. 85-87.
- 16 Cynthia Ozick, "S.Y. Agnon and the First Religion," in *Metaphor & Memory: Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 210.
- 17 *Pesikta deRav Kahana*, 16:9.
- 18 *Mekhilta deRav Shimon bar Yoḥai* on Exodus 13:21.

לזכר נשמת אמי מורתי  
מרת אסתר עליה השלום

*In memory of my mother Esther, may she rest in peace*



## העקוב למישור

מעשה נאדם אהר  
ושמו מנשה היום מיושבי  
ה'ק מואץ יע"א שירד מנכסיו  
והעניות ר"ל העניות  
על דעת קונו והטיל פגם  
מישור אלה והיה הנהגת  
ה'הנהגה ומטולטל ולא יקפץ  
דני אהרנים וזכה לשם  
ולשארית טמטואן  
מפגם הספר מאנינות  
ועליו ועל טיבאטו  
ה'טוב אומר  
ואי יראו את עונם  
ושינשי' יל'  
וטפרו על עונם  
מיסוריהם

חברו והעלו על ה'כתב  
ש"י עגנון

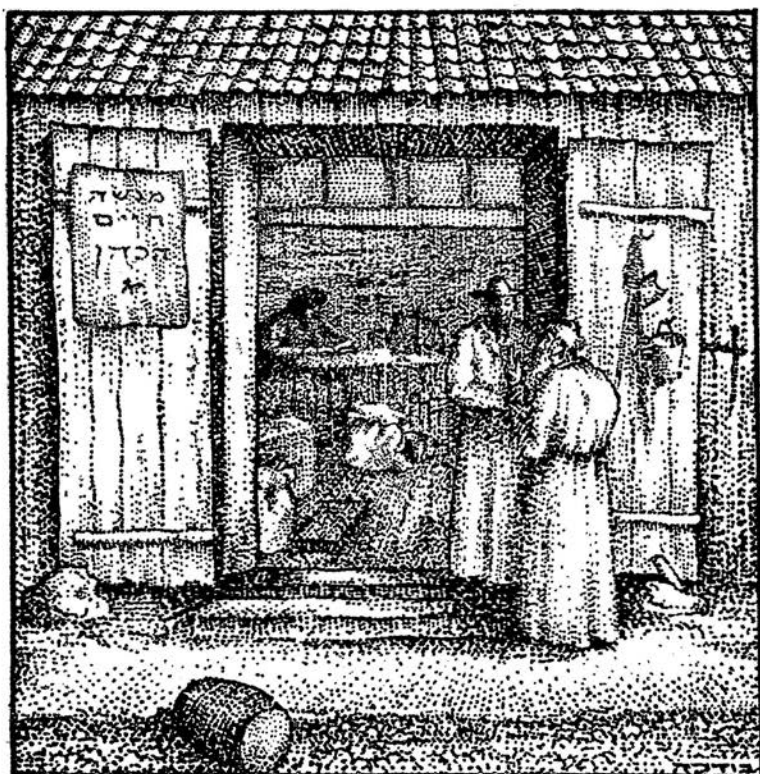
# And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight

This is the tale of a man named Menashe Chaim  
who lived in the holy community of Buczacz  
(may His city be rebuilt, amen)  
and fell upon hard times, losing everything he owned.  
Poverty made him lose sight of his Creator  
(may the Merciful One spare us)  
and he left a stain upon Israel.

Though he drifted from place to place, scorned and hounded,  
he refrained from ruining the lives of others  
and so preserved his name and left behind a lasting legacy.

All this will be explained and elaborated in this book.

Of him and those like him Scripture says,  
“And then they will make amends for their sin,”  
which Rashi of blessed memory explains thus:  
“Their sufferings will atone for their sins.”



יתאונן על פגעי הזמן כי יפול האדם למדחפות  
 ויהבילוהו נגעי העולם. ישועת ה' כהרף עין. מפעלות  
 צדיקים ומליצת המליץ בלשון טיי"ץ. יורדי היו"ם  
 בעניו"ת ומכתב ההמלצה. תוכו רצוף מעשה בתוך  
 מעשה ולכן פרק זה ארוך ביותר.

# Chapter One

**I**n which the author rails against the ravages of the times, how a man may tumble suddenly into ruin and be led astray by the evils of the world ◊ The salvation of the Lord in the blink of an eye ◊ The works of mystical masters and the flourishes of the poet in translation ◊ They that go down to need in slips and the letter of recommendation ◊ One tale inside another, hence this chapter is particularly long

The Wise One (may he rest in peace) has said, “Wealth gotten by vanity shall be diminished.” By this he means to teach us how frail and flimsy, how utterly insubstantial money is, how the very nature, the very matter of wealth is such that even vain and airy things can deplete it, can make it disappear. No great force is required. Wealth is so flimsy, so insignificant that any slight or trivial or inconsiderable thing that comes along sends it into the government’s coffers where it vanishes into thin air. So when we see a rich man who has lost his fortune and is now penniless, we should not be surprised, or inquire how he became so diminished, or consider his character and deeds, for it is the quality and nature of money itself to dwindle for no reason.

—*Binah Laltim*, Sermon 69

## *Chapter One*

Not so many years ago, in the town of Buczacz (may His city be rebuilt, amen), there lived a fine, upright Jew by the name of Menashe Chaim HaCohen, a native of the holy community of Yazlivitz. While he could hardly have been counted among the world's rich and mighty nor have found his place among the nation's notables, still the income he earned from his general store was ample rather than meager. He lived with his wife Kreindel Charne, with whom God had graced him in his youth, and together with his wife ate his fill of bread and pursued righteousness and mercy all his days. He truly embodied the maxim of the Sages of blessed memory, "Who does righteousness at all times? He who supports his wife and children." At least partially embodied – for the man was childless. As they had no children, she, his helpmeet, put all her efforts into running their business, presiding over everything that had to do with the shop, as was customary among the scattered communities of Israel in those days.

Ordinarily, such a man expects to dwell with his wife in peace and tranquility, to spend his days pleasurably enjoying the good of the earth, and, when his appointed time comes, after a hundred and twenty years, to behold the splendor of the Lord. Alas, when it pleases God to subvert a man's ways, good fortune swiftly takes wing, and the Omnipresent has many emissaries to fling a man down upon the dunghill of need. While they sat safe and sound in their home, fearing no evil, offering praise and thanks to the blessed Lord for their shop and its serenity, fortune's fury sprang upon them. Their shop caught the eye of one of the town's prominent shop owners and he coveted it, seeing how good their portion was. Having close ties to the authorities, he went to the court of the town's lord and offered him significantly more rent than Menashe Chaim and his wife were then paying, and the shop nearly fell into his hands.

For in those days, the government of His Majesty, Emperor Franz Josef, had limited the authority of the rabbinic courts. High-handed Jews could flout their people's covenant and challenge the established claims of others with impunity. Who could prevent them? Had Menashe Chaim's wife Kreindel Charne not supplemented their rent with several guildens, who knows if they would even have finished out the year there. From then on, it seems as if the Evil Eye (may the Merciful One spare us) oversaw everything they did, and their business

declined dramatically. Neither did their competitor stand by idly, hands in his pockets. He devised various schemes to ruin their business and deprive them of their livelihood. He lowered the price of his goods. He maligned their shop. When Menashe Chaim attempted to alleviate their plight by bringing in a new machine to grind cinnamon, peppercorns, and coffee beans, rumors spread through the town that a demon from Hell turned the grindstone, that devils danced upon it, and other such calumnies that are best not committed to writing. In short, on the day the shop's rent was due, they had not a penny to pay the lord of the town, let alone the extra guildens they had already added, as explained above. Then there were the bribes to the deputies and lackeys and to the court go-betweens and to anyone who could advocate on their behalf. Taxes and duties consumed the rest of their efforts. As the government levied taxes on shopkeepers based upon the rent they paid, now that the shop cost them more, the taxes for the government's coffers, for municipal upkeep, and for paving roads naturally increased as well. Their stock dwindled markedly. More and more of their shelves stood bare until, as the Talmud says, the breach in the wall was greater than what remained standing. But the Lord's steadfast love has not ceased, and His compassion does not fail. Divine Providence (may He be blessed) always dilutes the bitterness of the bad by mixing it with some good, so even in this time of trouble Menashe Chaim and his wife despaired not of His mercy. Their faith remained strong. Soon He would rescue them from the grip of misfortune.

Indeed, as we are told in *Kehal Ḥasidim*, nothing stands in the way of faith. Once the Baal Shem Tov (may his merit shield us all) received a heavenly call to journey to a certain village to learn the true character of faith so that he might in turn teach the people an invaluable and much needed lesson. When the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples arrived at the village, they lodged with the local tavern-keeper, a dignified old man who welcomed them warmly, prepared a great feast for them, and rejoiced at such distinguished guests.

At daybreak, when the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples rose for prayers, a Cossack, an officer of the nobleman who ruled the village, entered with a corded whip in his hand. He struck the table with the whip three times, then left. None of the tavern staff said a word. The guests



## *Chapter One*

were baffled, having no idea what these cracks of the whip might mean. They turned to the host. He was as cheerful as before, had not reacted at all. As they completed their prayers, the Cossack returned. Again he struck the table with his whip three times. Again, not one of the tavern staff said a word to him. The disciples looked at each other in bewilderment. The Baal Shem Tov finally asked their host why the gentile had thus struck the table. The host answered, "It's a warning. Today I must pay the lord of the village the rent for the tavern." He warns them three times, and if the bundle of money is not ready after the third time, the nobleman will take the tavern-keeper and his entire family and throw them in the dungeon. "From the look on your face, it appears that you have the money," said the Baal Shem Tov. "Hurry then, take the money, go to the nobleman now, before our meal. We'll wait till you return safely to us." "As of now I haven't even one penny," the host responded, "but the blessed Lord will surely provide for me. Let's eat and drink. We needn't hurry. We have three hours before the time arrives. The blessed Lord will surely provide for me." They all sat down to dine, they took their time, and the host's face showed not a hint of worry about the money. The guests looked at one another in amazement. It was truly wondrous to see. When they finished eating, the Cossack came a third time and struck the table thrice with his whip. The host neither stood nor stirred in his seat. After they ate and recited a proper, unhurried, even-paced grace, the host dressed in his fine Sabbath clothes, girded himself with his wide sash, and announced, "Now I'll go to the court and bring the rent to the nobleman. I'll not tarry. Stay here. I'll quickly return." The Baal Shem Tov asked him again, "Do you have the money you need?" He answered, "As yet I haven't even one penny, but the blessed Lord will soon send His aid." And he left.

The Baal Shem Tov stood in the doorway with his disciples and watched him go. As he walked briskly toward the court, a wagon veered from its path to meet him. He stood beside the wagon, spoke with the passenger, and left empty-handed. The wagon continued toward the tavern. But before it arrived there, it slowed and stopped. The tavern-keeper was called back to the wagon and handed some money. When the wagon arrived at the tavern, the disciples inquired of the new guest, "What happened between you and the tavern-keeper? Why did you call