

SHMUEL YOSEF AGNON'S SOIL OF THE LAND OF ISRAEL:

AN ONOMASTIC EXAMINATION

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Like so much else in Israel, modern Hebrew literature is a miracle. That there have been so many sweet birds singing is almost unbelievable. And that there exists an active audience eagerly listening for the singing of those sweet birds is just as incredible. So many difficulties have stood in the way. More than half of the 2,500,000 Israeli Jews are quite recent immigrants, and almost all the others are recent. Hebrew, practically until the present moment, was the first language of a tiny minority: most Diaspora Jews could neither read nor write nor speak Hebrew with understanding.

In addition, not long after the birth of this century, the spiritual, cultural, and organizational center of Hebrew shifted from Eastern Europe to the Mid-East, and the bulk of Ashkenazic writers in Hebrew had to learn a new system of pronunciation and to absorb a new vocabulary. Arabicized elements and the give-and-take of daily speech also produced significant modifications from older Hebrew

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dialects. And so two or more pronunciations and readings were not infrequently possible in a single line.

Modern Hebrew authors, unlike counterparts in other lands, were not born into a fully developed spoken or written language. Hebrew is an old-new language in an old-new land. Never dead, Hebrew nevertheless did not grow the way a mother tongue does in a native land. Not that Church Latin is a proper analogue. Hebrew, until the relatively recent renaissance sparked by Zionists, was employed mainly for communal records and correspondence both secular and religious although there had been periods of activity in belles lettres.

Used much more today than at any previous time in the more than 2,000 years since the close of the Biblical period and the subsequent collapse of the Jewish state, Hebrew has become a vehicle for daily living, with its limited vocabulary being continually enlarged. Writers have had not only to neologize but also to make new use of traditional phraseology to overcome vocabulary paucity, language rigidity, and other handicaps of this--for all intents and pur-

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poses--reborn tongue.

Like so much else in Israel, modern Hebrew literature is a paradox. The modern period in Hebrew literature may be said to have begun when the Jews of Europe left the ghettos and abandoned or broke down long-standing religious traditions. Secular themes became a major preoccupation of writers. But the new Hebrew literature from its meager beginnings during the late Eighteenth Century until after World War I had no secular literary tradition in which to take root. Writers had to express their themes in the language of the religious tradition.

All this makes for complexity of idea, image, feeling, and manner--a handicap in which Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888-1970), 1966 Nobel Laureate for Literature and the foremost modern Hebrew writer, reveled. Agnon, perhaps the last major modern Hebrew writer to have experienced the decline of the Jewish community in Europe and the rise of Israel, brings both these experiences to the center of his art. Agnon, a profoundly Jewish writer seeking reality behind appearance, deals with twentieth-century concerns in terms

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of the entire Jewish tradition.

Not a pastiche, Agnon's style, a blend of many centuries, combining a balanced and evenly controlled mode of diction with a particular lyric grace, and a supple syntax with a breadth of vocabulary drawn from sources thousands of years apart, is capable of subtly representing even the finest nuances of meaning, emotion, and manner--from nostalgic memories of childhood to mystical experience and legend to existential anxiety and alienation.<sup>1</sup> The requirements of an Agnon tale control the poetic density of the stylistic strains at work within the story. As a result, the task of his critics, let alone translators, is most difficult.

A literal translation of Agnon is impossible, even to capture the elements of a story. Agnon works out of familiarity with the more than 2,500 years of oral and written literature--an immense aggregation--including such compilations as the Bible, the Talmud, Rabbinic commentary, the Siddur, folk tales and legends, as well as works by individual authors--poets and philosophers and writers of

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fiction--throughout the centuries. Agnon alludes to or incorporates words and phrases from the entire corpus of Hebrew literature, so that in new and unexpected settings they highlight a phrase or passage, extend its meaning, and make it echo earlier contexts.

Very difficult for a modern reader untrained in the associative patterns, motifs, and phrases of the long Jewish tradition (despite experience with T.S. Eliot, Joyce, Faulkner, Proust, and Kafka--with whom Agnon has close affinities), because Agnon takes the reader's ability for granted, is understanding recognition in both the old and the new contexts of such reshaped words and phrases. An allusion, a symbol, even a sound drawn from any one selection can refer at once to many selections in the ages-old tradition. And Agnon, whose erudition served him as an inexhaustible reservoir, does not hesitate to combine traditions as with an interlocking linguistic pattern (say, Hebrew and Aramaic) or ideational pattern (say, Rabbinic commentary and Freudian symbology) or religious pattern (say, sacral ritual and secular application).

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The impact of even seemingly simple lines in an Agnon story is often quite difficult to comprehend. The variety of interpretation is frequently bewildering, almost as though critics are not reading the same tale. Agnon, himself, supposedly said, "After I write a story, I wait to read the critics to find out the many things I meant by it." Each critic seems to find in Agnon precisely what he is hunting for--whether in the anti-religious bias of Kurzweil, or the literary historical approach of Band, or the New Criticism explication of Leiter.<sup>2</sup> But the relationship between an artist and his art is seldom so one-sided. While the work of Agnon seems autobiographical, we should avoid over-psychologizing and we should be careful to find out not only what Agnon the artist is doing in the immediate work we are examining but also how it fits into the entire canon of his works.

Since the difficulty of Agnon's style is supposedly responsible for his obscurity, it is the style that we should aim at analyzing but not by throwing out of artistic alignment any of the other elements of a story. A critic

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should rely not on study of Agnon's rhetoric alone but also on observation of its many ramifications within plot structure, characterization, etc., which develop a story into an organic, coherent artistic whole--charging the simple with complexity, the straightforward with ambivalence, the transparent with ambiguity. In this endeavor, onomastics is an invaluable aid. Indeed, the fact that critics have not relied more fully on onomastics is most surprising--as we shall see.

Agnon's attitude toward names can easily be determined. While it might be too strong to insist that "Shibbush" (Agnon's fictional name for his home town, Buczacz) is the Yoknapatawpha of Hebrew literature, the name makes several things clear. Like Faulkner, Agnon is artistically serious in treatment of names. As in the works of Faulkner, names identify cousins, relatives, and friends in the various stories, and serve as guideposts to motifs, symbols, and themes. Like Faulkner's, Agnon's fictional world is tied to a very specific and real one. Unlike Faulkner, Agnon is not an admirer of his home town, for the name "Shibbush"

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means mistake or error and connotes decline, corruption and ruin. As so much of Agnon's fiction demonstrates, Shibbush is a mistake for Jews, a deadly mistake. The Diaspora brings death and destruction to Jewish life and ways.

So serious about names was Agnon that he took his own name from Agunot (1908), his first major tale, the story of a number of characters in Jerusalem each of whom remains tied to the object of his love--whether a human being or a country or a profession--that he has lost. Agnon's name, which means not only bereaved but also anchored, takes us deep into Agnon's heart and mind and reveals his major concern both as man and artist, as the following passage from The Sense of Smell (1937), a discursive essay written by Agnon in defense of his style, demonstrates. In the short section called "The Secret of Writing Stories," Agnon says:

Out of affection for our language and love of the holy, I burn midnight oil over the teachings of the Torah and deny myself food for the words of our sages that I may store them up within me to be ready upon my lips. If the Temple were standing, I would take my place on the platform with my fellow choristers and would recite each day the song that the Levites used to say in the Temple. But since the Temple is destroyed and we have neither Priests in their Service

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nor Levites in their chorus and song, I devote myself to the Torah, the Prophets, the latter Scriptures, the Mishnah, Halacha and Aggadah, the Tosefta, rabbinical commentaries and textual glosses. When I look at their words and see that of all our precious possessions in ancient times only the memory is left us, I am filled with sorrow and that sorrow makes my heart tremble. And from that trembling I write stories, like a man banished from his father's palace who builds himself a small shelter and sits there telling the glory of his ancestral home.<sup>3</sup>

For Agnon, as the pivotal tale Agunot and the defensive essay The Sense of Smell demonstrate, Jerusalem and Israel are not just a city and a country. They are holy: the City and the Land, where the Divine Presence shines eternally. Other cities and other countries are exile, the Galut, where Jews suffer from banishment and physical and spiritual loss with consequent failure to fulfill their deepest responsibilities. For Agnon, the central question is how the Jew bereft of the bygone world of his and his people's origins, and anchored in the Judaic tradition, could conquer the isolation, anxiety, and alienation of the modern world. Homeless and dispossessed spiritually, culturally, and physically, where could the twentieth-century Jew live?

There are other autobiographical onomastic elements

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across the body of Agnon's work, revealing how heavily Agnon leans on personal experience in his writings. Again and again, Agnon tells stories in his own name. In the novel In the Heart of the Seas (1934) one traveler is Shmuel Yosef, who bears Agnon's two first names. He is the son of Shalom Mordechai HaLevi, whose wife's name is Esther; and these are the exact names of Agnon's parents. In the short story On the Road (1944) Agnon uses the two names Shmuel Yosef again. Both the novel and the short story deal with preparation for and actual return to Israel. In the short story, Knots of Knots (1950), which is about a conflict between schools of art, Agnon tells of Shmuel Emden and Josef Eibeschuetz. Here Agnon combines his own names with the names of two principals in an eighteenth-century controversy that shook European Jewry to its foundations. Is it too much to suppose that the use of the double names was deliberately designed to let Agnon reveal the narrator's inner artistic struggle as well as his own? In the short story Forevermore (1954) Agnon begins all proper names with an ayin or a gimel, excluding names that

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start with any other letter of the Hebrew alphabet, presumably implying that the story--while not necessarily true--is certainly an imaginative reconstruct of experience of, by, and about the author himself, Agnon.

Agnon employs names imaginatively in almost every story. In the early novel The Bridal Canopy (1920), there is at the end a long poem of some forty pages about a couple with as many sons as there are letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The couple name their sons alphabetically. Each son matches himself alphabetically with a book of the Bible, and so Abraham studies Job (ג'ו'א), and Baruch studies Bereshit, etc. Not only that, each son matches himself alphabetically with a secular science, and so Abraham studies algebra, and Baruch studies balshanut (philology). Each son marries a girl with an alphabetically matching name, and when the sons go up to Israel they settle in places whose names alphabetically match their own. Agnon seems to be saying with this use of names at the denouement of The Bridal Canopy that the world is divinely ordered not only in terms of the Word

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but in respect of each of the letters of the alphabet as well.<sup>4</sup>

There are many examples of Agnon's onomastic ingenuity across the entire canon of his works. In The Whole Loaf (1933), perhaps the most anthologized of Agnon's short stories, a central character is Yekutiel Ne'eman. Yekutiel is a name used for Moses in Jewish legends, and Ne'eman means faithful. Moreover, Yekutiel Ne'eman has written a book attributed to a Lord....(the four dots obviously referring to the Tetragrammation, and the entire business reminding us of Moses and his divine reception at Sinai).

Agnon uses names to reinforce his irony. In The Candles (1922) Mr. Haim Apropos leads anything but a pertinent life. In To the Doctor (1932) Mr. Andermann (Mr. Otherman), perhaps the narrator's alter ego, distracts and detains the narrator with worldly concerns and advice. In the tale, The Letter (1951), a character is named with delicious irony Gedalia (The Lord is great) Klein (Small).

Agnon's use of names in the story Soil of the Land of Israel helps us to understand and appreciate this hitherto

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incompletely understood and only partially explicated tale.

Agnon chose a powerful and apt central symbol in Soil of the Land of Israel. For a religious Jew the soil of Erets Yisrael (that is, soil of the land of Israel) evokes associations such as the holiness of the actual earth of Israel, and as the handful of soil from the Mount of Olives that Jews in the Diaspora desired to have cover their eyes at burial, so that in the Messianic Age they will be among the first resurrected when the Messiah appears in Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives. Other symbols are developed in the plot, whose function is to provide a surface reality beneath which the main thesis is subtly developed in a structure of ironies built out of manipulation of religious terminology, chiefly names of God.

Soil of the Land of Israel is one Agnon tale whose date of publication, 1937, provides a somber background in actual historical fact for the story--if one remembers the plight of European Jewry and the fate it was to meet at the hands of Hitler and other anti-Semites throughout the continent. But the time of the story is not the date of pub-

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lication. The story is set much earlier in Galicia, in the days prior to World War I, in a time that so many of us today consider halcyon, when the Polish province was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and when Jerusalem was part of a barren and desolate wasteland in control of a Turkish satrap.

In the original Hebrew, Soil of the Land of Israel consists of five chapters. I shall try to summarize the tale in words as close to the meaning of the original Hebrew as possible, and I shall try to include all incidents, chapter by chapter, so that I neither twist the story out of focus nor distort the stories within the story, as Agnon draws the reader up and down and in and out of various levels of internal and external experience.

The first chapter serves as an abbreviated version of the entire story, in which the succession of events reveals their symbolic quality and hints at the central irony around which Agnon constructs his tale. A nameless narrator reminisces in a kind of interior monologue that Joyce and Proust and Eliot would have appreciated, for the reader

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feels the presentness of the past amid the pastness of the present.

On a visit from Jerusalem to Poland to pray at his ancestor's graves the narrator meets an unnamed gravekeeper, an early Zionist, whose financial harrassments--such as his opening a store to sell pruning forks and ploughshares, only to have the army turn the implements into swords--prevented his emigration to Israel and left him poor. Agnon, alluding here to a Rabbinical dictum implies that there can be no blessing in property outside the Land of Israel (and with the ironic reversal of Isaiah he hopes to show the impossibility of achieving Jewish ideals in the Diaspora).

Through his townsmen's charity, the poor man was given a job as gravekeeper. The gravekeeper shows the narrator the cemetery where the dead outnumber the living of the nearby town two to one. (The reader understands that Agnon considers the Diaspora, a vast graveyard for Jews, to have only a part and a grotesque present but no future.) The narrator thinks of the dead as blessed of

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God even though their burial in unclean earth--that is, in soil outside the Land of Israel--will delay both the advent of the Messiah and their entry into the Messianic Age.

(Agnon here employs the abbreviation **די** for **השם**, the traditional and still reverential term for God, whose literal meaning is The Name. He follows with **יוצרם**, Their Creator, another traditional and reverential term for God, and with **הקדש ברוך הוא**, The Holy One Blessed Be He, still another traditional and reverential term for God.

After leaving the cemetery, the narrator chats with the gravekeeper about their youth when the first oranges and wine from Israel were exported to their town. The narrator says that conditions are better today in Israel although religious ways are not followed. People have their own land and grow oranges and make wine. But they have forgotten the blessings, and they drink soda water rather than wine, the fruit of the earth, that gladdens both God and man. Agnon draws this reference from Judges to point up ironically the alienation from religion. The term used here for God is **אלקים**, another traditional and rever-

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ential name. It is deliberately misspelled because Jews are forbidden to pronounce the name of God. But Agnon, drawing on Rabbinical commentary, where  $\text{אלוקים}$  is associated with divine judgment, uses God's name ironically to reinforce the idea of man's alienation from the spiritual.

At the end of their talk, the gravekeeper gets the narrator to promise to send him some Israeli soil because he is at the age at which his father died. As we shall see, the religious term Agnon uses for favor,  $\text{חסד}$ , "grace," hints at the central irony of the story.

The second chapter, Kafkaesque in manner, shifts the story inward to arouse tension until the reader experiences the narrator's alienation from faith and country. Having returned to Jerusalem, the narrator ignores his promise, partly out of concern for his own affairs, partly out of fear of the Arabs who have recently been stoning Jews attempting to go to the Mount of Olives. But the gravekeeper writes that he is anxious about sudden death, God forbid, and that he wants a handful of soil of the Land of Israel to cover his eyes at burial. The word for "God forbid,"

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הַלִּילָה, although put as a flat request, is ironic in terms of the story, for the time of death of the gravekeeper is essential to Agnon's theme.

The narrator answers the gravekeeper that there is still time. The gravekeeper writes again, this time emphasizing the גִּדּוּל, the grace involved, and pointing out that the narrator is privileged to stay in the Land of the Living while the gravekeeper must remain in the Diaspora. "The Land of the Living," a traditional name for the Land of Israel, now begins to take on overtones--all the more so when the gravekeeper states in his letter that even a clump of soil of the Land of Israel atones.

The narrator realizes that he should fulfill his promise. Paying his respects at a funeral procession of a poor man, he walks the traditional four cubits (paces).

The reader perceives that the narrator has performed a

מִצְוָה, a religious obligation to do a good deed. Because the funeral procession is so small, the narrator continues to follow it and accidentally finds himself on the Mount of Olives, where he is now able to dig some dirt.

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Back in Jerusalem, he buys the finest material, sews a sack of it, and fills the sack with the dirt. Then he goes to the post office.

While waiting for the postal clerk, whom he ironically refers to as "He Who Dwells in This House," the narrator feels burdened and resents his promise. The term *הַשׁוֹכֵן בְּבַיִת הַזֶּה*, "He Who Dwells in This House," after usage in the Book of Prayer, refers to God and the Temple; that is, the post office today in the modern era is the secular equivalent of the Temple of ancient Israel and the clerk is the secular equivalent of God in this instance of bitter irony.

The narrator says to himself God forbid that he should belittle Israel, but why would the gravekeeper crave Israel soil roasted like bones in the sun (an ironic reference to Ezekiel and the decline of piety) when Polish earth is so fertile. Ironically, the narrator has taken the name of God in vain (the term here is *הַסְוֵאָה*, for he has consciously denigrated Israel. Then the narrator, remembering that the gravekeeper's property had been taken from him and

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that all the poor man had left is a chance at resurrection, tries to mail the sack.

After a long wait in crowded lines, the narrator at last reaches the postal window. But the postal clerk, saying that the package does not meet regulations, rejects it. The narrator, asking a question, refers to the clerk as **סר**, that is as sir or as God, for Agnon ironically employs the term to hold both meanings. (In Hebrew, **סר**, literally signifies sir or lord.) The clerk tries to instruct the narrator with "bundles and bundles" of regulations which the narrator cannot remember. Agnon scores doubly here. We remember from **השוכן בבית הנה**, that the post office is the Temple and the postal clerk God; moreover, regulations, **הלכות**, are for Jews religious regulations, which the Talmud specifically forbids being taught in "bundles," that is, in large clusters.

The next day the narrator returns to the post office. Insisting that the sack contains mere dirt, the narrator ironically and consciously denigrates Israel again. He accuses the clerk of being too strict, and the clerk re-

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sponds by giving him a thousand other regulations. Again, the narrator leaves, filled with frustration and anxiety.

Even friends cannot help him get the package accepted, for--as with Job--their comments do not bear on reality. The narrator wanders around as if in a nightmare--seeing graves everywhere in Jerusalem, and remembering the town in Poland as filled with the dead. (The reader understands that the narrator unconsciously equates Israel and the Diaspora.) The narrator is angry that a clerk who does not love Israel can be buried in its soil, whereas a Kasher Jew (that is, a proper Jew) cannot, and he thinks that only skeptics perceive the truth. He says that he wants to love the Supreme Authority (השלטון) and he hopes to dissociate himself from its haters. Agnon is employing a double irony here, for the narrator wants to pledge allegiance to the secular authority, while--as we shall see--it is the religious Supreme Authority, God, Who will be responsible for the narrator's perceiving the truth. Indeed, השלטון refers to both the secular and the religious Supreme Authority.

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The third chapter, quite short for emphasis, turns the story around. The narrator senses that man cannot rely on himself alone. He says that one thinks of doing such and so, and then He Who Dwells Above ( *וזה שלמעלה*, a traditional and still reverential term for God) intends doing otherwise. Agnon is implying that man is responsible for his actions; God, for man's fate. Put another way, we can say that God combines man's deeds with coincidence to determine human destiny. The narrator, without perceiving what is happening to him internally, reads in the newspaper of a thieving postal clerk who had blocked God's mercy by stealing alms God had inspired donors to send their Jewish brethren. In this brief chapter, Agnon employs traditional and still reverential terms for God four times: He Who Dwells Above ( *וזה שלמעלה* ) once, The Place ( *הטקום* ) twice, and the Holy One, Blessed Be He ( *הקדוש ברוך הוא* ) once.

The fourth chapter counterpoints the ironies and deepens reader understanding of what is happening unconsciously to the narrator who returns to the post office in hope, he

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says, of miracles and an hour of grace. Approaching a newly appointed clerk, a proper (Kasher, again) daughter of Israel, he hesitates--appearing almost like a man intending to cheat the government. Agnon's term for government, מלכות, also means the kingdom of God. The narrator asks her as a favor (חסד again, which means grace) and as a good deed (mitzvah also means religious obligation) to accept the package. She does, and the narrator praises the ruling power. Agnon's term, שמואל, a traditional and still reverential term for God, was used earlier by the narrator when he wanted to pledge allegiance to the secular government. Even though the narrator does not fully perceive what has happened, the reader does. This name of God fully alerts us to the irony here: God, not man, is responsible for acceptance of the package.

The fifth and final chapter reconciles the outer world with inner reality, making the sacerdotal and the secular one--even as they were for religious Jews in the past. Here all the terms for God are traditional and reverential, and irony is conspicuously absent. Agnon has positive

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points to make.

Sons of the gravekeeper, emigrants to Israel, tell the narrator that their Rabbi, seeing that the soil had arrived at the hour of their father's death, said the men of Israel are possessed of the Holy Spirit (בעלי רוח הקודש). The sons add that the narrator by means of the Holy Spirit (ברוך הקודש) fulfilled the promise to their father at exactly the right time. The narrator replies that it is the Land of Israel that is possessed of the Holy Spirit, and it alone was responsible for the timing of the soil's arrival. Previously, so the reader remembers, the narrator had remarked ironically that a lump of Israeli soil atones. Now, the reader perceives, the narrator had unwittingly told the truth: soil of the Land of Israel does indeed atone. In the Future to Come (ולעתיד לבא) the gravekeeper will come up to Israel and live forever. May it be God's will (יהי רצון), the narrator says, for the sons to be happy in Israel. May God, that is, the Holy One, Blessed Be He (הקדש ברוך הוא), enlarge their "limits" until their lips wear out from saying כִּי, enough.

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The last word of the story, 'ל, enough, stands for God and His grace and man's gratitude. 'ל, as in the Heggadah from which Agnon took it, is an affirmation of faith in the Deity, an acceptance of man's and God's role in the mystery of causality, and a recognition of the holy destiny of the Jew. Agnon, thus, ends his story Soil of the Land of Israel on a note of affirmation.

Contrary to the assertions of ambiguity and baffling obscurity by Agnon's leading critics both here and in Israel an onomatological examination of Soil of the Land of Israel makes Agnon's feelings clear. Kurzweil, the dean of Israeli critics of Agnon, insists--wrongly--that Agnon's real attitude toward the religious problem is intense hostility toward Orthodox ways and views. Band, whose book on Agnon is the best we have in America, is correct in showing how details of Soil of the Land of Israel were built by Agnon into a thematic framework, but he stops short of working out the meaning and implications of that thematic framework. Leiter, who correctly sees the story as a structure of ironies, incorrectly assesses the narrator

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as a smug and sanctimonious ass, and just as incorrectly pictures Agnon's theme as that of suffering, judgment, and grace--with the narrator "finding himself a prisoner who cannot free himself from the prison."

I have no wish to belabor the work of critics, for I owe them much. I am grateful for their giving me so much material permitting of my disagreement with them, and I should like to build on their work in my onomastic examination of Soil of the Land of Israel.

Agnon uses names of God in Soil of the Land of Israel to build a structure of irony, contradiction, and paradox, in which the answer becomes self-evident to the problem of modern man who, struggling to fulfill his moral responsibility, spiritually finds himself without a home. The narrator and the gravekeeper are nameless because they symbolize what is happening to the Jew in the Galut and in Israel. The narrator, although a pious man, mouths blessings like people in the Galut and in Israel because his piety is external. The Diaspora is a graveyard for Jews, and Israel is not their home. We remember that אֵיבָ ( "house" in Hebrew)

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stands in Soil of the Land of Israel for both the ancient Temple and the modern post office. Foreign regulations rather than Judaic principles are the Supreme Authority in Jerusalem. But by the grace of God the narrator behaves charitably toward another Jew, and he therefore is permitted to perceive the essential holiness of the Land of Israel plus its redemptive qualities now (God enlarges a man's limits there) and in the Future to Come (burial in its soil makes Resurrection possible).

When reading Soil of the Land of Israel, we remember the meaning of Agnon's name (bereaved and anchored), and we realize that here Agnon reveals how tied he is (as in the story Agunot from which he took his name) to a love object seemingly inaccessible in the modern world, whether in the Exile or in the Land of Israel. Agnon, that is, is tied to Orthodox Judaism, which for untold generations has made every aspect of a Jew's life holy and worth living.

We remember the date of publication of Soil of the Land of Israel, 1937. We ask what was the plight of the Jew during the Hitler era and before the emergence of the

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State of Israel. We bring the question up to date by asking what is the plight of today's Jew. The answer, according to Agnon, may be simple but it certainly is not easy. We have a clue in the name Agnon gave to his home town in the Diaspora, Shibbush (mistake), and we have material for the answer in the story Soil of the Land of Israel.

Like so many other Jews in our time, Agnon felt cut off from Jewish ways. Although anchored in Judaism, he was bereft of the means (State, Temple, People) to live fully as a Jew. But he neither relinquished his religion nor rejected his people. As Soil of the Land of Israel demonstrates, Agnon believed that the only way to Jewish fulfillment and redemption is settlement in Israel.

While we should not--indeed, can not--identify Agnon with the narrator, who is a rather simple and artless fellow, we must recognize that Agnon is certainly in more than one sense, telling his own story. This approach allows him to be at one and the same time both inside and outside the narrative, so that he open up the many possibilities inherent in even the seemingly simple situations

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of this straightforward plot. Nevertheless, despite Agnon's highly complex and apparently ambiguous presentation, the main theme of Soil of the Land of Israel--which is also Agnon's deeply held belief--is crystal clear and unequivocal. Examination of Agnon's use of names of God makes it possible for us to isolate motifs and symbols crucially independent and yet integral parts of the whole.

Even a lump of soil of the Land of Israel atones. Reality is not in conflict with the ideal. For the Jew, homeless, and dispossessed physically and culturally and spiritually, the Land of Israel is home. And, according to Agnon, that is where Jews should be, living the Judaic tradition, and carrying on the history of their nation-people, Israel.

Soil of the Land of Israel may have one major meaning, but Agnon does not develop the subject of exile and return baldly. He enables his readers to think about and to feel the multifaceted experiences of anxiety, guilt, and alienation embodied in this story of modern Jewry. Soil of the Land of Israel is concerned with the behavior as well

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as with the destiny of the Jewish people, with the plight of Jewry everywhere, with the links and the polarities between Jews in Israel and Jews scattered across the globe.

The narrator, although in Israel, is unable at first to sustain religious belief except in its outer forms, and so he is in exile, as much in exile as the gravekeeper in the Diaspora, who has not observed the forms of religion but who in his heart has remained a Jew. The narrator finds the Supreme Authority inaccessible until his heart returns to traditional Jewish ways of charity, and then his alienation and guilt and doubt and anxiety disappear, even as the gravekeeper's exile and fear of death are removed by acquisition of earth from the Land of Israel.

Soil of the Land of Israel deals with disorientation and loss of will until the narrator, an existential hero brought face to face with Judaism, is able to meet the crisis in Jewish faith and values by reconciling sacerdotal requirements with secular demands. Then he performs the act that defines him. Then he learns the meaning of the paradox of destiny. Man must act to determine his fate,

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but the source of all causality is in God, in the Land of Israel, used by Agnon here as one of God's attributes, almost as a name of God, for it signifies the blessing of God's presence.

Agnon in Soil of the Land of Israel involves the knowledgeable reader in a many-sided world of spiritual significance and historical experience, so that he understands that if the Jew betrays the past, he betrays the future. What has sustained the Jew from time immemorial can sustain him during the unparalleled horrors of the twentieth century. For Agnon, the Jewish tradition is not dead, and God is not inaccessible.

Agnon portrays archetypal struggles and internal and external experiences of modern man in so profoundly Jewish a way that they are not only contemporary and parochial but eternal and universal as well. This is why the story, Soil of the Land of Israel, opens in the past, works through the present, and continues on into the future. For Agnon, the Jew is not walking idly through time; the Jew is marching to eternity. By implication, the fate of

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mankind is on his back.

Onomastics, we have seen helps the critic to appreciate how Agnon uses natural situations to convey a sense of reality the while history takes on metaphysical dimensions and transcends time and place in a well-nigh perfect blend of content and form from adroit, even poetic, manipulation of religious terminology, chiefly names of God.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. Cf. Robert Alter, "The Genius of S.Y. Agnon," Commentary (August 1961), p. 109, and Edmund Wilson, "A Man of Unquestionable Genius," Ariel (Winter 1966-67), p. 35.
2. Baruch Kurzweil, "Religion in Agnon's Work," Ariel (Winter 1966-67), pp. 7-30; Arnold J. Band, Nostalgic and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon (Berkeley, 1968); Samuel Leiter, "The Ironic Imagination: A Reading of S.Y. Agnon's 'Soil of the Land of Israel,'" Conservative Judaism (Winter 1967) pp. 1-26.
3. Alter, p. 109, translation his.
4. Adapted from Baruch Hochman, The Fiction of S.Y. Agnon (Ithaca, 1970), p. 65.