

TWO SCHOLARS WHO  
WERE IN OUR TOWN  
AND OTHER NOVELLAS

S. Y. AGNON

NEW AND REVISED TRANSLATIONS  
FROM THE HEBREW  
EDITED AND ANNOTATED BY

JEFFREY SAKS

*The Toby Press*

*Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town  
and Other Novellas  
by S.Y. Agnon  
Edited by Jeffrey Saks  
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These stories, published by arrangement with Schocken Publishers, are available in Hebrew as part of the Collected Writings of S.Y. Agnon – *Kol Sippurav shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon*, © Schocken Publishers in 23 volumes (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv), most recent edition 1998-2003.

*Original publication data:*

“Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town” appears here in English for the first time. *The following stories have been revised and annotated for this edition, based upon the following original translations:*

“In The Heart of the Seas” translated by I.M. Lask, originally published by Schocken Books, NY (1947). “Tehilla” translated by Walter Lever, originally in *Israel Argosy*, vol. 4 (1956).

“In the Prime of Her Life” translated by Gabriel Levin, originally in *Eight Great Hebrew Short Novels*, edited by Alan Lechuk and Gershon Shaked (1983; third revised edition *The Toby Press*, 2009).

*The Toby Press LLC*  
POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776–8531, USA  
& POB 2455, London W1A 5WY, England  
[www.tobypress.com](http://www.tobypress.com)

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ISBN 978-1-59264-355-4

Typeset in Garamond

Printed and bound in the United States

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## *Preface*

In “The Story of the Seven Beggars”, one of the Tales of the great Hassidic Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, a hunchback describes his mind as “a little that contained a lot”. Since he could hold some ten thousand people in his mind, along with all their desires and problems and needs, all of their trials and tribulations and triumphs, every element of their lives and nooks of their personalities, he presumed that he must be the “little that contains a lot.” But, Rebbe Nachman relates, everyone mocked him, saying that those people in his mind were nothing and in fact he was nothing as well.

The influence of Rebbe Nachman on Nobel laureate S.Y. Agnon should not be underestimated. Agnon saw in the Hassidic Master the starting point of what would become modern Jewish storytelling. Gershom Scholem remarked that “if the ‘Story of the Seven Beggars’ had not already been told by Rebbe Nachman, it could have become an Agnon story and would have taken on a perfectly ‘Kafkaesque’ aura” – reminding us of that other Jewish surrealist writer, who together with Agnon and Nachman, were all shocked by “the permeability, the loosened state of tradition” (G. Scholem, “S.Y. Agnon – The Last Hebrew Classic?” in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*).

And like the hunchback (and his literary creator, Rebbe Nachman), Agnon, too, possessed “a little that contained a lot” – a phrase

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drawn from the world of Midrash and Kabbalah to describe the miraculous compression into finite space of more than seems possible – that is, an imagination so vast that it contains multitudes, whole worlds of “imaginative history” emanating from and occupying the mind of finite, mortal man. This act of creativity, Godlike in its manner of bringing about creation through word and thought, is precisely the talent demonstrated in the literary world Agnon created.

The four novellas published here in new or revised translations are exemplars of the richness of that literary world created by Agnon, with webs of interconnected locales, legends and leitmotifs. The stories range over a roughly century-long period from the 1820s to the 1920s and are situated in Agnon’s ancestral Galician hometown of Buczacz (or its literary doppelganger, Szybusz), or in the Land of Israel of the Old Yishuv and in Jerusalem of the later British Mandate.

The following notes are meant to give background to these four novellas, as well as brief outlines to the major themes of each work and how each fits within Agnon’s canon. The annotated bibliography which closes this volume outlines the secondary literature and commentary written on these works in English.

“Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town” (*Shnei Talmidei Hakhamim Shehayu Be’Irenu*) is being published here in English for the first time, in a debut translation by Paul Pinchas Bashan and Rhonna Weber Rogol, who have also prepared the annotations together with this volume’s editor. The story tells of the epic clash between two Torah scholars, *talmidei hakhamim*, who according to the Talmudic phrase “cannot abide each other in matters of *halakhah*” leading to the death of one and the exile of the other (see Sotah 49a). First published in Hebrew in *Luach Ha’arets* 5707 (Autumn 1956) and later collected in Agnon’s *Samukh veNireh*, the story is set over a period of roughly thirty years during the mid-nineteenth century in an unnamed Our Town, clearly meant to be Buczacz (as evidenced by the presence of one of Agnon’s own ancestors in a cameo role).

Narrating from a point “three or four generations” after the action, the narrator waxes nostalgic – even elegiac – for a time when “Torah was beloved by Israel and the entire glory of a man was Torah, [when] our town was privileged to be counted among the

most notable towns in the land on account of its scholars.” And yet, as the plot unwinds and insults are traded in the Beit Midrash, the ancient Talmudic curse begins to work its dark power, leading to the tragic denouement. And here we see Agnon’s power as a tragedian on an almost Greek scale. With his typical irony at work, the narrator pines for an earlier, more ideal time which turns out to have been rife with flaws and tragic personalities of its own. This draws the reader to question – was it always ever thus? Indeed, consider the Talmudic template on which Agnon sketches his modern tale of scholarly eros, ego, and clash – the relationship between Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish (especially as described in Bava Metzia 84a). After reading Agnon’s novella the reader might go back and study that primary text and see how he distilled the classical sources of the Beit Midrash into a modern midrashic matrix on which he composed his Nobel-winning literature.

“**In the Heart of the Seas**” (*Bilvav Yamim*), a tale of the journey to the Land of Israel by a group setting out from Buczacz, was Agnon’s first English translation published by Schocken Press, in 1947. While originally published in Hebrew in 1934 in a volume marking H.N. Bialik’s sixtieth birthday, its earliest fragment was present in a small sketch sent for an unpublished 1926 *festschrift* in honor of the dying Franz Rosenzweig.

Written in the style of nineteenth-century Hassidic tales, the novella’s weaving of folklore and aggada into modern literature helped cement Agnon’s reputation as the greatest Hebrew author of his time. The story was also singled out for praise for its idealization of the Love of Zion, at a time that the Yishuv was undergoing great struggles. Between 1933 and 1935 over one hundred and fifty thousand Jews had arrived in Palestine, more than all that had arrived in the years of the British Mandate up until that point. (Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany in January 1933, leading to a wave of German Jewish immigration). Agnon’s biographer Dan Laor shows that contemporary critics were especially mindful that this was the background on which the novella was composed. Agnon’s tale is a *mélange* of both a realistic as well as supernatural narrative of *aliyah*, and was interpreted as a cautionary statement to the immigrants and

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builders of the Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel: Zionism cannot only focus on the here-and-now, physical construction, but must recall the miraculous story that undergirds our work. It is a vision that emphasizes love of the land over labor, and the supernatural over nature. This may be precisely the reason Agnon chose to retroject himself into the story despite its setting one hundred years before its composition – “Rabbi Shmuel Yosef, the son of Rabbi Shalom Mordekhai ha-Levi of blessed memory, who was versed in the legends of the Land of Israel, those legends in which the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, is hallowed; and when he commenced lauding the Land, people could see as it were the name of the living God engraved on the tip of his tongue” – for that was how he envisioned the purpose of his artistic output.

An attentive reader will notice the dual frequencies on which the story is broadcast and the contrast between the natural travel tale of the group versus the miraculous voyage of Hananiah who floats along “in the heart of the sea” atop his magical kerchief. For the full messianic symbolism of this ersatz “magic carpet” see Agnon’s short story “The Kerchief” (in *A Book That Was Lost*, Toby Press). Lask’s translation has been revised and newly annotated by this volume’s editor.

“**In the Prime of Her Life**” (*Bidmi Yameha*) opens Agnon’s collection of “love” stories *Al Kapot HaMan’ul* (“At the Handles of the Lock”; cf. Song of Songs 5:5), and is in many ways the type of psychological love story favored by European realism of the time. Yet, like “*Tehilla*” (which concludes this volume) and “*Agunot*” (Agnon’s signature story, from which he drew his penname), it is a disturbed – and, in this case, disturbing – love. One wherein two souls bound or “chained” together (the root of *Agunot* and *Agnon* means “to be anchored together”) cannot actualize their love, with disastrous echoes reverberating into later generations.

Although Agnon crafted many fabulous female characters in his writing, this is a unique case of a first-person female narrator – the teenage protagonist, Tirtza Mintz of Szybucz, whose voice lends a youthful, even naïve innocence. Yet Agnon conceals from his reader the identity and gender of the narrator until we are a number of pages into the novella (consider the difficulty of doing this as artfully and

seemingly effortlessly as he does given the gendered nature of Hebrew grammar!). When we do discover this fact, the reader of the Hebrew text takes note of the lyrical, Biblical Hebrew style of the story, a departure from Agnon's typical Rabbinic mode. Presumably he does so to echo the elocution of a young girl in early twentieth-century Galicia, the setting for the story, for whom the Hebrew of the Mishnah and Talmud would have been less fluent. Gabriel Levin, in this translation, has done a masterful job of capturing the Biblical rhythms and cadences, so reminiscent of the Book of Ruth (look out for parallels in content and theme as well as style). It is precisely these lyrical weavings of text and master-text, of the modern tale with its Biblical templates, which give this tale of love lost and found its emotional and psychological depth and complexity. The degree to which the reader trusts Tirtza as a reliable narrator of her own unconventional love story will inevitably determine his or her understanding of the whole story. Staking a position in this matter becomes all the more urgent upon reaching the surprising ending and discovering the setting from which Tirtza's account has been narrated.

Israeli novelist A.B. Yehoshua, commenting on "In the Prime of Her Life", suggests that it exemplifies Agnon's ability to bring to life and demonstrate for the reader the complex sub-conscious of his characters. This is what draws us in as readers, and what draws us back again in the ongoing, interpretive endeavor surrounding these stories. Amos Oz has called this novella the "bedrock of modern Hebrew literature" (the interested reader will find echoes of "In the Prime of Her Life" in Oz's novel *My Michael*; see also chapter II of his autobiography, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*).

The story, first published in the journal *HaTekufah* in 1923, also serves as a prologue of sorts to Agnon's great novel *A Simple Story* (1935; translated by Hillel Halkin, Toby Press revised edition, 2013), in which our characters exist in the liminal outskirts of that work's plot. "In the Prime of Her Life" sets patterns of Jewish star-crossed love which Agnon expanded on in *A Simple Story* and throughout his entire collected writings.

"**Tehilla**", perhaps Agnon's most beloved tale, explores righteousness, repentance, redemption, reward and punishment. The story



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is set in the Old City of Jerusalem, and, although exact dates are never explicitly stated, based on some internal evidence, and the fact that the unnamed narrator shares many biographical similarities with Agnon himself, we can establish that the action unfolds between the Fall of 1924 and Spring 1925 (see timeline appended to the story's annotations). However, the emotional force of "Tehilla" comes through the long narrated backstory, in which the 104-year-old title character tells us her tragic life story, going back to events as early as the 1820s.

While not apparent from the first half of the novella, "Tehilla" is also a love story, although a decidedly Agnonian love story – there's no chance for a happy ending. Like so many of his descriptions of love interrupted (again, most especially "In the Prime of Her Life"), it is a tale of a disturbance in first love which haunts subsequent generations. But in "Tehilla" that disturbance is precipitated by the lamentable hatred between Jews (in this case the historic clash between Hassidim and their opponents), leading to a century of suffering. What makes Tehilla so remarkable is her capacity to transcend this suffering. Indeed, the source of her longevity may very well be the century-long attempt to rectify past misdeeds. Tehilla embodies a type of faith all-too unfamiliar to us moderns, certain that she lives in a deterministic world yet still tasked to act as a free agent, responsible for her actions. If her story is a tragedy it is a decidedly Jewish one, and she reminds us of Nietzsche's quip that "The Greeks blame the gods, the Jews blame themselves."

"Tehilla" is also a love story for the Old City of Jerusalem; that Old Woman, who had been living within its walls since before any settlement had been constructed in New Jerusalem, i.e. since before 1860, is herself an embodiment of the Holy City. When Agnon describes her in 1950 (in lines which are among the most famous in all of Hebrew literature) as "Righteous she was, and wise she was, and gracious and humble too: for kindness and mercy were the light of her eyes, and every wrinkle in her face told of blessing and peace" – he was very likely describing the Old City, its inhabitants, society and life, which had only recently been destroyed and barred to Jews with the division of Jerusalem in 1948. "Tehilla" is a lamentation for Jerusalem, as a place and as an idea, embodied in the life of one remarkable woman.

If we consider how these two themes – internecine strife amongst Jews and the loss and destruction of Jerusalem – intersect, we hear the words of the Sages being whispered to us by Agnon from between the lines of “Tehilla”: “The Holy Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred...” (Yoma 9b).

The Hebrew story appeared first in *Me’asef Davar* (1950) and was subsequently collected in Agnon’s *Ad Henah*. Translators of Agnon are always torn between a more literal and a more lyrical rendering. This revised version of Walter Lever’s translation leans toward the latter preference, while a parallel version by I.M. Lask (which appeared in *Tehilla and Other Israeli Tales*, 1956) was more literal. For those who cannot grapple with the original Hebrew yet want a richer reading of this profound text, engaging with both translations would be an interesting experiment in understanding how translators balance the tension between the words of a text and its spirit.



The annotations, which follow each novella, are intended to aid the reader who wishes to more fully experience the profundity of Agnon’s writing which is so hard to capture in translation, namely: the manner in which he distilled the language and lore of the Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, together with the medievalists and Hassidic masters – all recast in the form of modern literature. To explore the intertextual Agnonian matrix is to enter a world of pseudo-Midrash, one which is no mere literary device, but the “very source of his creativity, perhaps its main subject,” according to the Israeli critic Gershon Shaked. “To a greater degree than that of any other writer in modern Hebrew literature, Agnon’s work is based upon intertextual connections.”

Similarly, the notes provide some background on various Jewish rituals, phrases or concepts, which Agnon assumed his Hebrew readers would have been familiar with as a matter of course. (That this may no longer be the case, even for native Hebrew speakers, is a sad commentary on contemporary cultural literacy in the Jewish State, and presumably part of the reason why Agnon and the other Hebrew classics get whittled away each year from school curricula and chain-store

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bookshelves.) However, because reading Agnon in any language is meant to be first and foremost an aesthetic-literary experience, we have not inserted endnote references into the text itself.

I am grateful to Paul Pinchas Bashan, Gabriel Levin, and Rhonna Weber Rogol, the living translators of two of these four stories, for their creativity and cooperation with this project. Paul and Rhonna's new translation of "Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town" is a particularly welcome addition to the Agnon bookshelf as it is long overdue and has been one of his most important works unavailable in English until now. Their collaboration as translators, which was initiated by Rhonna with the encouragement of Prof. Nehama Aschkenasy, of the University of Connecticut (while discussing the influence of this story on the recent Israeli film, "Footnote"), is a hopeful sign for Jewish and Hebrew high culture in the United States.

The commitment of The Toby Press to continue publishing Hebrew classics in superb English translations is the personal vision of our publisher, Mr. Matthew Miller, and the animating force behind The Toby Press S.Y. Agnon library. I thank him and my colleagues at Toby – Tani Bayer, Tomi Mager, and especially Gila Fine. Various friends and teachers have been particularly supportive, encouraging, and helpful with different aspects of my ongoing engagement with S.Y. Agnon, and I am pleased to single out Avraham and Toby Holtz, Yoel Kortick, Alan Mintz, Avi Shmidman, and especially Ariel Hirschfeld. The friendship, advice, and *havruta* of James S. Diamond *z"l* is sorely missed. My own understanding of the stories in this volume, and many others in this series, has been greatly enhanced through the phenomenal privilege of teaching regularly at the Agnon House in Jerusalem (and via [www.WebYeshiva.org/Agnon](http://www.WebYeshiva.org/Agnon)), and I am grateful to the many students I have encountered there and online, as well as to the staff of that great institution, and to its director, Oreet Meital.

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## *Bibliography of Works in English*

**L**ike most of Agnon's important stories, the four novellas in this volume have been the object of analysis and interpretation by the major scholars and critics of Hebrew literature. Readers who would like to sample some of that body of scholarship and commentary, but are limited to material available in English, would find the following book chapters and essays to be worthwhile.

The most comprehensive, nearly encyclopedic, book on Agnon in English remains: Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968). Each of the four stories in this volume are treated there, and the reader will find concise reviews of plot and theme for: "Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town" on pp. 402-405; "In the Heart of the Seas" on pp. 262-270; "In the Prime of Her Life" on pp. 115-118; and "Tehilla" on pp. 406-409.

### **"Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town" \***

Lea Goldberg, "The Author and his Hero," *Ariel* 17 (1966-67), pp. 37-54 – Agnon's artful work as an author who speaks through a story-teller narrative to both portray an innocent

and pure ideal while at the same time creating space for two different interpretations – as demonstrated in “Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town” along with other stories.

Yair Mazor, “S.Y. Agnon’s Art of Composition: The Befuddling Turn of the Compositional Screw,” *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986), pp. 197-208 – on Agnon’s use of unexpected plot development, as exemplified in “Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town”.

Harvey Shapiro, “Multivocal Narrative and the Teacher as Narrator: The Case of Agnon’s ‘Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town,’” *Shofar* 29:4 (2011), pp. 23-45 – explores the narrative voices that guide the reader through the story, comparing the pious traditional voice at the core versus the modern voice of the framework which distances the reader from the tale.

[\* Not having been translated until now, the absence of many critical studies in English on “Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town” is not surprising. It is hoped that this volume will help spur the growth of such secondary literature and analysis.]

### “In the Heart of the Seas”

Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), chapter 3, pp. 81-102 – on Agnon’s use of the contradiction between mythic and political Zionism to “reclaim the future in the name of the past.”

Roman Katsman, *The Time of Cruel Miracles: Mythopoesis in Dostoevsky and Agnon* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002), pp. 15-21 – the issue of myth and miracle in the novella.

Alan L. Mintz, “In the Seas of Youth,” *Prooftexts* 21:1 (2001), pp. 57-70 – proof of the value of prolonged engagement with an Agnonian text; demonstration of what Agnon said: “Any book not worth reading twice probably wasn’t worth reading the first time.” [Mintz revisits his earlier reading of the story in: “Agnon

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on the Individual and the Community,” *Response* (Summer 1967), pp. 28-31.]

Ruth R. Wisse, *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 189-192 – on the amalgam of serious and comic to form an ironic statement in the novella.

**“In the Prime of Her Life”**

Nitza Ben-Dov, *Agnon’s Art of Indirection: Uncovering Latent Content in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1993), pp. 135-138 on the novella’s web of Biblical allusions; chapter 7, pp. 107-133, on the role of the old woman (“Benign Mentor or Evil Genius?”).

Nitza Ben-Dov, “Lambs in Their Mother’s Pasture: Latent Content in Agnon’s ‘In the Prime of Her Life,’” *Hebrew Studies* 29 (1988), pp. 67-80 – explores the thematic and structural function of Tirtza’s dream as it operates in the novella.

Yael Halevi-Wise, “Reading Agnon’s *In the Prime of Her Life* in Light of Freud’s *Dora*,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 98:1 (Winter 2008), pp. 29-40 – on Agnon’s sources for the paradigm he establishes of dysfunctional generations linked by a shared love, which became such a potent template for subsequent Hebrew authors.

Astrid Popien, “Tirtza and Hirshl in Germany: S.Y. Agnon’s *In the Prime of Her Life* and *A Simple Story* in the Context of the Family Novel in European Realism” in *Agnon and Germany: The Presence of the German World in the Writings of S.Y. Agnon*, edited by H. Becker and H. Weiss (Ramat Gan : Bar-Ilan University Press, 2010), pp. 115-150 – on Agnon’s “realistic family novels” as adaptations and ironic transformations of the European model (as exemplified by Theodor Fontane and Thomas Mann).

Naomi B. Sokoloff, "Narrative Ventriloquism and Muted Feminine Voice: Agnon's 'In the Prime of Her Life'," *Prooftexts* 9:2 (1989), pp. 115-137 – reading the novella in light of feminist critical thought and literary interpretation.

Abraham B. Yehoshua, *The Terrible Power of a Minor Guilt: Literary Essays* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), chapter 7, pp. 108-130 – on the father-daughter relationship as a key to the moral map of the work.

### "Tehilla"

Risa Domb, "Is Tehillah Worthy of Her Praise" in *History and Literature: New Readings of Jewish Texts in Honor of Arnold J. Band*, ed. W. Cutter and D. Jacobson (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2002), pp. 107-115 – an against the consensus reading which posits an ironic portrait in which Tehilla is not the exemplar of piety usually assumed.

Nitza Ben-Dov, "The Dead Do Not Praise the Lord: Alter's Psalms, Agnon's *Tehilla*, Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*," *Hebrew Studies* 51 (2010), pp. 203-210 – the tension between belief in this world and belief in the world to come, as telegraphed through the use of (Alter's translation of) Tehillim in "Tehilla".

Theodore Friedman, "Exploring Agnon's Symbols," *Conservative Judaism* 21:3 (Spring 1967), pp. 65-71 – aims to unravel the character of Tehilla through what she might symbolize on different levels of meaning in the text.

Amos Oz, *The Silence of Heaven: Agnon's Fear of God* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), chapter 2, pp. 13-29 – a controversial book by Israel's leading contemporary novelist, which dedicates one of its three chapters to exploring religious themes in "Tehilla".

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Hillel Weiss, “The Messianic Theme in the Works of A.B. Yehoshua and Amos Oz,” in *Israel and the Post-Zionists*, ed. S. Sharan (Tel Aviv: Ariel Center, 2003), pp. 204-226 – response to Oz’s reading of “Tehilla” in *The Silence of Heaven*.