The Bridal Canopy

S.Y. AGNON

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY
I.M. LASK

WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY
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The Toby Press

Foreword to The Toby Press Edition of The Bridal Canopy

Agnon's Rooster ex Machina and the Miracle of Faith

The Bridal Canopy, Nobel laureate S.Y. Agnon's mock epic novel, is an elaborate frame story encompassing dozens of Hassidic tales. The narrative is decisively double-edged: naïve, in the manner of classic folk tales, as well as sophisticated and artful, as a modern work. *The Bridal Canopy* parodies the Hassidic folk tale, but does so very delicately; it censures without acrimony, always maintaining an air of reverence for the Old World. Unlike other depictions of Eastern European Jewry's shtetl life, the story is sufficiently subtle to support divergent readings – and that is clearly part of Agnon's accomplishment. Other Hebrew- or Yiddish-language authors who portray this period level their criticism much closer to the surface.

Set in early nineteenth-century Galicia, the plot is part quest, part comedy of errors, progressively departing from its opening tone of realism. It is the tale of poor Reb Yudel of Brody (in today's western Ukraine, about 100 miles north of Agnon's native Buczacz), his

long-suffering wife, Frummet, and their three modest and righteous daughters, each in need of a bridegroom.

Burdened with poverty, and the need to provide dowries, Reb Yudel sets out schnorring, to collect the requisite funds to marry the girls off. The Hebrew title, *Hakhnasat Kallah*, is the colloquial rabbinic expression for raising the money needed to arrange such marriages.

Despite his dire financial straits, pious Reb Yudel "always sat at the holy toil of the Torah," serving God "in awe and fear and love and never thought of acquiring honor through study or being esteemed a scholar by himself or others." He dedicates himself to the study of Torah in order "to fashion a seat for the Divine Presence," a Kabbalistic notion that one who performs *mitzvot* in this world creates space for God to enter and dwell amongst us. But here Agnon is writing not merely in a mystical and theological vein, but also in an ironic one. Reb Yudel is fashioning a seat for the Divine, but the poor fellow doesn't even have a chair of his own to rest on in his damp hovel, sitting on the floor instead. From the very first chapter, Agnon has established a sharp tension between the material and spiritual realms that serve as the two plot poles of *The Bridal Canopy*.

Reb Yudel's sole possession is a scrawny rooster, Reb Zorach (whose name connotes the dawning of day at which he crows to rouse his master for morning prayer: the translator has tried to capture this by dubbing him Reb Reveille). Throughout his peregrinations, Yudel's great fear is that his wife, Frummet, plagued as she and his daughters are with starvation, may have made a chicken soup out of his "alarm clock."

Each morning, even before Reb Reveille would cock-a-doodle-doo, Reb Yudel struck out to serve the Lord in prayer and study. Following the services, if he were hungry, what would he eat for breakfast? He would recite *parashat ha-man* (Exodus 16:4-36), the biblical verses that describe the manna, the heavenly sustenance given to the Israelites in the desert. If Yudel cannot eat eggs and buttered toast, he can at least fill his belly with this type of spiritual sustenance. "When his desires rebelled and turned too strongly toward matters of food and drink he would subdue them with a page of Gemara" – the only hearty meal available to one whose cupboard was bare.

When Frummet, always the practical one, asks her righteous husband how a penniless man might marry off three daughters, "He sighed a bitter sigh, then turned his gaze back upon the Gemara, putting his trust in the Lord, since all things accord with His Will and Word." Here, we see Agnonian ambiguity at work. Does Reb Yudel suppose that God will do His work, so therefore I am free to sit and study, or is it that I had better sit and study in order to merit that God will then do His work? We, modern readers, are free to engage Yudel with reproach or sympathy, but we must understand that for the character, Yudel the man of simple faith, the turn to the page of Talmud is an act of religious activism, not a passive abandonment of fatherly responsibility.

Frummet, however, is not so certain that this is the way the world operates, and she develops another plan. She turns to the Rabbi of Apta, an actual historical figure, Rebbe Avraham Yehoshua Heschel (1748-1825), the great-great grandfather of Abraham J. Heschel (the notable twentieth-century Jewish philosopher). Known as the *Ohev Yisrael* – the Lover of Israel – both after his characteristics, as well as the name of his volume of teachings on the weekly Torah portion, R. Heschel was one of the great Hassidic luminaries of his generation. Prof. Avraham Holtz, the "dean" of *Bridal Canopy* scholars, has uncovered that Agnon's source for the novel's main plot comes from none other than *Nissim veNiflaot*, a Yiddish collection of authentic Hassidic wonder tales about this very same Rabbi of Apta; see Holtz, *Ma'aseh Reb Yudel Hassid* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1986). Holtz's masterpiece, a richly annotated edition of *Hakhnasat Kallah*, in Hebrew (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishers, 1995), is essential for understanding the novel, its sources, and the realia of Reb Yudel's world.

The Rabbi of Apta sends Reb Yudel out to go begging for donations, but directs Frummet to borrow a decent set of clothing for him to travel in, and a feather pillow to pad his kaftan so he will appear to have some flesh on his bones. After all, even a schnorrer needs to look respectable in order to collect respectable sums. Since Reb Yudel is not only looking for a dowry, but a son-in-law as well, the Apter Rav stipulates one condition: when he finds the bridegroom,

whatever the father-in-law offers for his share of the dowry, Yudel must offer the same amount.

Setting off in his borrowed clothing (the notions of disguise and mistaken identity run throughout the novel), he is led by Nuta the faithful wagon driver, who serves as a clear-headed Sancho Panza to Yudel, the Jewish Don Quixote.

After several months of travel, punctuated by a variety of longer and shorter tales held within the frame of the main plot, Yudel and Nuta arrive in the city of Rohatin, having collected a total of two hundred gold pieces. While not enough money to complete his mission, Yudel decides that it is immoral to beg further donations while he has such a sum in his purse. Moreover, as his incessant travel has made praying with a *minyan* well-nigh impossible, and has drastically diminished his Torah study, it occurs to Yudel that he's been derelict in his religious duties. With this in mind, our protagonist sits at the inn, dedicating himself to his page of Talmud. The townsmen presume him to be a wealthy man: after all, who else has the luxury of studying all day with no care of earning his livelihood? As part of the comedy of errors, Yudel is taken for wealthy Reb Yudel Nathanson of Brody (technically, Reb Yudel's proper name, albeit unused and unknown), another historical character who makes a cameo appearance in our tale. Nathanson (d. 1832) was a renowned merchant and one of Galicia's richest Jews. When it becomes known that he is seeking a match for his daughter, you can imagine the line that forms at the door.

The wealthiest Jew in Rohatin, Reb Vovi Shor, offers his son as a match, pledging twelve thousand gold coins toward the dowry. Following the directive of the Rabbi of Apta, and despite the fact that in his five months on the road Reb Yudel has collected a mere two hundred gold coins, he matches Reb Vovi's offer. It is important to note that our Reb Yudel never deceives anyone; others confuse him for the affluent banker. His pledge is not a trick but a demonstration of faith, since he is carrying out his Rebbe's command. The fathers-in-law shake hands on the deal, agreeing that the bridegroom's family will soon follow to Brody where the wedding will be arranged, and Reb Yudel heads for home. The return journey is the subject of the

second half of the book, wherein he retraces his steps, periodically encountering the colorful characters that populate Book I.

The mistaken identity becomes compounded twofold, as on Purim – a day dedicated to masks, disguises and hidden identities – a character called "Reb Yudel who is not RebYudel," an imposter who has been posing around Brody, even in the very house of the rich Yudel Nathanson, regales the townsfolk with wonder tales of Reb Yudel's travels, which, thanks to Nuta's loose lips, have already been exaggerated into the things of legend.

The novel comes to a head when the Shors arrive for the wedding. At the risk of doing a disservice to the multiple tributaries of the main narrative current by cutting the story short, Reb Yudel is revealed as the pauper he really is. Thrown into a fury at the discovery that their presumed wealthy in-law is a mere threadbare Jew, the Shors are momentarily placated with an invitation to dinner. Frummet, naturally, is nearly apoplectic at the news. How can she host these rich in-laws in her basement hovel with nary a potato to boil? And how does Yudel propose to meet his golden pledge?

Reb Yudel responds in his typical stance of faith: God will provide. Frummet goes running to the Apter Rav – after all, he's the one who got them into the mess to begin with. The Rebbe responds: *Reb Reveille!* Cook up that rooster and serve it to the in-laws. One can almost hear the sharpening of the knife whispering from between the lines. Like Chekhov's pistol, which if introduced in the first act must be fired by the play's end, we anticipate that scrawny Reb Reveille, having been presented in Book I, will find his way into the pot by Book II. However, God, who Reb Yudel is certain will intervene, works in mysterious and miraculous ways. The rooster escapes from the grasp of the young bride who was taking him to the slaughterhouse. He runs through the woods and into a cave containing a hidden treasure, soon to be discovered by the girl chasing after the fugitive main course. With enough gold and gems now to be truly rich, Reb Yudel marries off his eldest daughter, providing the reader with an unusually happy ending for an Agnon tale.

At the wedding, a visiting sage from Jerusalem sings a lengthy ballad. In the Hebrew edition, this piece of poetry runs for forty-five

pages; it has been extremely condensed in the final chapter of the English translation. The ballad is a complicated, multi-level acrostic about a childless couple finally blessed with progeny, one for every letter of the alphabet. So, for example, the second child, Baruch, studies the book of Bereshit (Genesis), then the three Bava tractates, marries a girl named Beracha, and together they set off for the Land of Israel where they settle in Be'er Sheva, and so on through all twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

The protracted song that concludes *The Bridal Canopy* may strike contemporary readers as odd, but it is a way to poetically telegraph the larger themes of the work. Hebrew literary critic Gershon Shaked interpreted it as a restatement of the message that virtue is rewarded, and echoes the values of faith, study and family, which are at the heart of this novel. Furthermore, it hints at a modern Jewish ending insofar as it places *aliyah*, settling the Land of Israel, as the fulfillment of the Jewish spiritual quest. Indeed, we are told that Reb Yudel and Frummet themselves settle in Jerusalem once they have married off all three daughters.

The ballad confirms that the world is as it should be, and that everything works out in the end for these poor folks, since they've allowed God Himself to do His work. The intrusion of what was interpreted as a Zionist message, retrofitted into a work set prior to the rise of political Zionism, is all the sharper when we consider the westward thrust of shtetl Jews in other Hebrew and Yiddish literature. Tevya heads for New York when forced out of Russia; for Agnon's characters, Israel is most often the destination, despite a spotty success record once there. It is no accident that Agnon chose to link a novel about the Old World of the shtetl to the New World of Jewish return to *Eretz Yisrael*. This serves both to build a bridge between the two worlds, and also stands in contrast with other authors who sought to denigrate the Diaspora and the shtetl's religious milieu (an attitude still prevalent in many quarters of Israeli culture).

In *The Bridal Canopy*, Agnon presents Reb Yudel's narrow world, and we experience that world only through his perspective of it as an exemplar of that world, its values and lifestyle. (External forces and conflicts, with gentiles, between Hassidim and their opponents,

and the presence of the Haskalah – Jewish Enlightenment – are all notably absent from Reb Yudel's world.) In this sprawling novel, a tight focus is maintained on traditional life. Its piety and poverty are showcased, with Torah study being the central axis around which Yudel's life spins. These elements were subjects of other works of modern Jewish literature, where they were usually made the subject of acerbic satire. A.M. Habermann recorded Agnon's observation:

> Consider what I did with the pauper Reb Yudel Hassid in my novel *The Bridal Canopy*. I created him as a person of substance, with charm after his own fashion, despite the events that befell him. What would our other writers have done with a character like this? Mendele would have made him ridiculous, in order to twist and poke; Sholem Aleichem would have made him the object of simple mockery. I sweetened the bitterness of Reb Yudel's poverty, removing the ridicule, making the pauper a more perfect character. Although clearly it would be better if we were not paupers! (*Massekhet Sofrim veSifrut* [Jerusalem: Reuven Mas, 1977], p. 129)

Readers familiar with Mendele Mocher Sforim (S.Y. Abramovich, 1836-1917), Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Rabinovich, 1859-1916), and others, will recall especially how *shidduchim*, arranged marriages in place of romantic love, were satirized. In like manner, we see their comic treatment of poverty and begging. Even those familiar only with the Hollywood version of *Fiddler on the Roof*, with all its deviations from the original Tevya stories, will understand how these features of shtetl life were being sent up, and will be able to recognize a contrast between that most famous dairyman and our Reb Yudel. (If, *oy gevalt!*, you only know Tevya from the play or the film, do yourself a favor and go back to the source material.)

Agnon is responding to that kind of corrosive construction when he creates Reb Yudel, and is in dialogue with those authors of the generation preceding his own. Our author's portrayal is not without bite, but it is drawn with a far gentler hand. Arnold Band points out that Reb Yudel remains intact, both as a literary character and as

a religious figure. Parallel characters fare more poorly at the hands of other writers. Agnon always sees with a kind of double vision: simultaneously nostalgic for and critical of the Old World, neither a shill for tradition, nor attempting to undermine it. Adoration, or, alternatively, satirization of a worldview does not indicate, in and of itself, an author's stance vis-à-vis that worldview. For Agnon, the situation is not one of either/or: he desires to simultaneously skewer *and* sacralize. In so doing, he asks what the past can offer the present and the future. And by posing such a question, Agnon invites his readers to consider their own destinations, despite the fact that his characters are not always able to make that journey forward.

As for Reb Yudel, the larger question remains: is he naively pious or is he merely ridiculous? Clearly, he can be read in both ways. But Agnon, writing in the 1920s and '30s (and other stories even later), has seen modernity and takes a little bit of that back with him when he's writing the past. That awareness, and the tragedy and humor it engenders, forever hovers above the naiveté in Agnon. *The Bridal Canopy* takes up the question of what constitutes a miracle. Yudel maintains a firm belief throughout that he will be saved by a miracle if only he sticks to his divine mission. When deliverance indeed arrives, the reader is left to determine the nature of the salvation. After all, what kind of miracle is brought about through poultry? The Hebrew reader is mindful of the fact that the term for rooster, *gever*, a homonym for man, renders Reb Reveille more masculine than the apparently passive Reb Yudel. The rooster is an acutely active force in the story. With the butcher's knife at his throat, he does the only sensible thing: he runs away, leading to the discovery of "miraculous" treasure (in fact, a quite-pedestrian cache, as the narrator has repeatedly reiterated that Jews of old would hide their fortunes in such caves in the hope of recovering the loot post-pogrom). Reb Yudel has a metaphorical knife at his throat – twelve thousand gold pieces of commitment and a case of mistaken identity with no exit strategy. While the rooster runs, Reb Yudel studies.

In fact, the novel has been criticized for its Deus ex machina dénouement (or perhaps it's a rooster ex machina). But that distaste for neatly solved plot problems is rooted in the unwillingness or

inability to imagine the world from within Yudel's faith perspective, as epitomized in the Hassidic tales Agnon uses as his model for *The Bridal Canopy*, all the while adding his own modernist twist. Yudel lives in a world where belief in God's miracles allows one to rely on God's miracles.

Like Don Quixote, to whom he has often been compared, Yudel set off on a journey empowered by books. Cervantes' epic was itself a parody of chivalric literature, its protagonist a delusional old man who responds to tales of chivalrous knights by launching his own quest for knight errantry, righting injustice, saving damsels, widows and orphans, and tilting at giants (be they only windmills). When he returns home, his housekeeper is burning his books to protect him from their fantasies, but it is too late to save him from his madness. Reb Yudel is semi-comical; Don Quixote is semi-tragic.

Don Quixote is someone whose worldview has been transmuted by reading. Reb Yudel, too, has read – but his books are Torah, and they have convinced him that the world works by way of miracles, because God will not disappoint His faithful. *The Bridal Canopy* is a comedy not just in the Shakespearean sense, as it concludes with a wedding, but because despite near-ruin, everything works out in the end. This is true whether the salvation was an act of God, or merely plain rooster luck.

Yudel is quite convinced of the former. Indeed, from his point of view, the prolonged suffering he endures is totally offset by his elevation of the spiritual over the physical. This, of course, produces the mayhem that fuels the plot.

And so, the Marx Brothers-type scene in which the rich Reb Yudel, the poor Reb Yudel, the imposter Reb Yudel who is not (really) Reb Yudel, and the wealthy in-laws are all brought together – takes place on Purim. Naturally, if a plot twist is to take place on any particular day of the year, Purim is pre-programmed for such a thing. On this holiday of masks and disguised identities, what is concealed will be revealed, and God works it all out in the end.

Fourteen years after penning *The Bridal Canopy*, Agnon published another novel. Widely considered to be his magnum opus, *Temol Shilshom*, in translation as *Only Yesterday*, is the story of Yitzhak

Kumer, Reb Yudel's great-great-grandson. In this second work, which is set almost a century later, the family fortune has dissipated and young Yitzhak heads off for the Land of Israel. The lengthy novel tells the tale of his life in Palestine during the Second *Aliyah* (in the decade before World War I), and addresses issues of theodicy and divine justice, all on the dramatic backdrop of settling the land in those days. Unlike the tale of his ancestor, Yitzhak's story is tragic (think *Akedat Yitzhak*, the Binding of Isaac, without the angelic reprieve). As the narrator rehearses again and again, his tragedy can be traced, at least partially, to the fact that in Yitzhak's generation miracles no longer occur the way they did for his great-great-grandfather, Reb Yudel, who merited divine intervention precisely because his simple faith could not conceive of a world without miracles.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT AND TRANSLATION

S.Y. Agnon wrote in a wide variety of genres, and only nearing the mid-point of his career, in 1931, did he turn to the novel as an artistic form: *The Bridal Canopy* was the result. The first iteration of what would become this lengthy book was published in three installments between 1919 and 1920. Not yet a novel, but more of a serialized novella, the work numbered about 18,000 words. While the skeleton of the plot was already present in the 1919 edition, Agnon expanded the work over the next decade, and its appearance in book form anchored the first edition of Agnon's Collected Works, having grown to about 118,000 words. (These bibliographical details, along with a detailed summary and survey of the literary criticism, can be found in Arnold Band's *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, pp. 126-184.)

The translation into English was undertaken by I.M. Lask, an important figure in Anglo-Jewish letters in Palestine. Lask was commissioned by Agnon's patron Shlomo Zalman Schocken, who understood the necessity of publishing the Hebrew author in western languages in order to draw international attention to Agnon as well as to the accomplishments of the new, modern Hebrew literature. Lask's edition, Agnon's first novel to be translated into English,

was published in 1937 by Doubleday, and selected as part of The Literary Guild of America (akin to The Book of the Month Club). This was a remarkable and unusually "Jewish" selection for American readers at that time. It was also the only book-length edition of Agnon's writing available in English until the late 1960s. This may have done a disservice to Agnon and given his readers in English a distorted view of his accomplishments. *The Bridal Canopy*, with its distinctly pre-modern setting, foreign to many mid-century Anglo-readers, portrays only one very specific, and partially atypical, aspect of his wide-ranging canon.

However, after Agnon's 1931 edition, and the 1937 translation, Agnon further revised the work for the expanded Collected Works of 1953. Growing by over twenty-percent, the full Hebrew version now weighs in at about 143,000 words. While the essential plot structure remains unchanged, various tales and anecdotes were added within the frame story. Unfortunately, Lask's translation was never updated to include the new material. While Lask's translation is accurate and faithful to the Hebrew original (he benefitted from consultations with the author), it was translated in a deliberately faux antiquated style in an attempt to capture something of the air of the original Hebrew's epic tone, claiming that he aimed to reproduce "the scent of an English style of a period corresponding in a way to that which Agnon set out to portray." While a new translation of the 1953 edition of *The Bridal Canopy* is a serious desideratum, The Toby Press is proud to offer this reprint edition of Agnon's classic novel, recognized by the Nobel Committee as one of his "most characteristic stories," which enabled Agnon to stand out "as a highly original writer, endowed with remarkable gifts of humor and wisdom, and with a perspicacious play of thought combined with naïve perception – in all, a consummate expression of the Jewish character."

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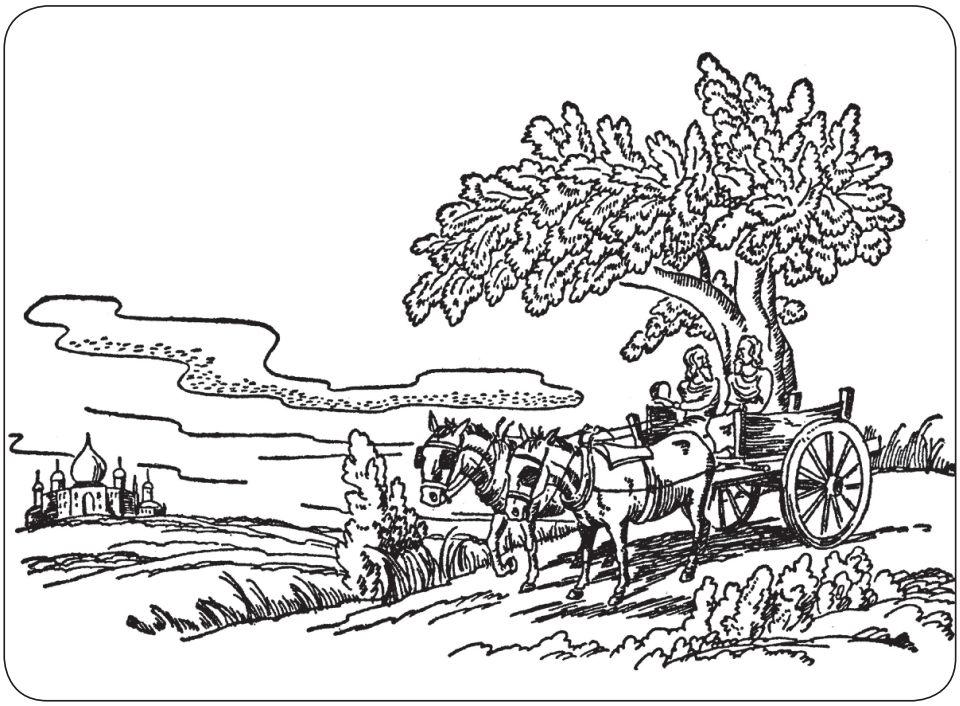

Title page illustration from the 1937 Literary Guild of America edition.