בס"ד

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*"אחת ממשימותיה של תרבות מצליחה היא לשמר את הישן ובו בזמן להפכו לחדש,*

*היינו לקיים רצף עם מסורת מסוימת, בלא לקפוא על השמרים.*

*האינטר-טקסטואליות נותנת בידי התרבות כלי רב עוצמה לביצוע משימה זו."[[1]](#footnote-1)*

It is in these words that Daniel Boyarin, scholar of Talmudic Culture, describes the Talmudic Midrash and the ways in which it came into being. Boyarin positions text at the forefront of any culture, and explains that the intertextual device is vital and significant for producing of a continuity of preservation and innovation. Boyarin relates specifically to Jewish culture and describes the Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, and the various Midrashim as a sequence, a textual chain in which each text constitutes an intersection with other texts. In this lecture, I would like to mark another link in this chain—the work of Nobel laureate in Literature, Shmuel Yosef Agnon. I will argue that the intertextual device, which is central to Agnon’s work, destabilizes the boundaries between old and new, between tradition and revolutionism, between obligation and authority and creative license, and between literature and interpretation. The Agnonian text enables different texts to speak to one another, to illuminate one another, and even to oppose one another, and by doing so, restores the revolutionary method employed earlier in traditional texts, from the Bible itself, through the Mishnah and Talmud.

Many literary works hint at and refer to earlier works. Therefore, historically, scholars employed the “documentary hypothesis” approach to explore the origins of these earlier texts. In the context of this traditional method, in which the reader will seek out references to earlier texts within the text in question, the reader’s primary objective is the discovery of what the author knew and what inspired them to arrive at the hidden texts, like a detective following clues to arrive at the truth. In contrast to this approach, Julia Kristeva coined the term “intertextuality” according to which “…”[[2]](#footnote-2) Kristeva’s theory undermines two underlying premises of the documentary hypothesis method: first, she dismantled the hierarchy between earlier and later, and viewed the text as an egalitarian space in which texts “meet and communicate” with one another. Any given text can be compiled of a number of texts by authors who were not necessarily familiar with one another, and whose writings, within the new context, generate a new discourse. Second, Kristeva claimed that the text itself, not the author, is the primary point of interest, and therefore, in an intertextual reading the reader will focus on the text itself, and less on the author and what he or she knew or heard. The way in which I choose to read Agnon’s novel adopts Hannah Kronfeld’s mediating approach. The approach assumes that the text is not entirely detached from existent hierarchies and is therefore limited and compromised; at the same time, it is capable of confronting earlier texts and undermining their fundamental presumptions precisely by means of the intertextual device. While in my reading of Agnon I do not ignore the hierarchy of the Bible, Mishnah, and Talmud as sacred texts, my understanding of this hierarchy is not as one that constrains, but rather as one that enables. As Boyarin points out, it allows for the preservation of the old by way of its revitalization, sometimes even in a manner that seems entirely to the contrary.

The scholarship on the intertextual aspect of Agnon’s work is broad and varied given the widespread view of Agnon as a writer knowledgeable in the sacred texts and who speaks in their voice. As Gershon Shaked writes, “…” These intertextual studies dealt mostly with questions related to Agnon’s personality—who influenced him, what did he read, what books could be found on his bookshelf, and mainly, can he be identified as either naive or revolutionary?[[3]](#footnote-3) Many studies have dealt with Agnon’s image—some argue that Agnon was a God-fearing man and that the virtue of his writing is constituted in its outstanding ability to describe the traditional world accurately. Others argued that although Agnon writes about tradition, his point of view is one of sharp irony based on a sense of criticism or lost opportunity. Both agree, however, that the Jewish sacred texts, including the Bible, Mishnah, and Talmud, occupy a central place in Agnon’s writing. In this context, Gershon Shaked defined Agnon as a “traditional revolutionary,” and highlighted the duality of the Agnonian text as containing both traditional and modern foundations. Shaked notes that the lack of overlap between the written words and the canonical source and the context in which these words appear is a revolutionary expression of the negation of tradition. Shaked perceives tradition, including the Midrash, as “....”[[4]](#footnote-4) However, does the Midrash truly represent a reconciled world without contradictions and criticism?

Daniel Boyarin, a scholar of the Talmud, presents the Midrash in a different light. First, he defines the Midrash as “...” These interpretations are homiletic readings of the Bible, and there are a number of characteristics unique to the Midrash that set it apart from all other readings of the Bible. First, they offer several—often contradictory—interpretations for the same word or verse simultaneously. Second, not infrequently, their proposed interpretations appears to be very far from the simple interpretation generated from the literal meaning of the verse. Boyarin defines the Midrash as “...” (69), as well as a literary genre in which heterogeneity is that which enables its creation, or in his words “...” (48). The polysemy and inner contradictions, as well as multiple innovations, which do not accord with the literal meaning of the verse, all present a Midrash that is entirely different from Gershon Shaked’s perception of it. It is not about a reconciled world, but rather about a world full of contradictions and rebellions, dialogue and complexity. The prevalent use of the intertextual device in the Midrash allows for the rejection of tradition and at the same time the preservation of its authority as an exclusive source. Furthermore, Boyarin explains that the midrashic practice of the conjunction of verses from different contexts (a practice which, according to Boyarin, originates in the Bible) by removing them from their literal context, is a practice that involves dismantling, rebellion: “...” In Boyarin’s view, the Sages were indeed aware that the Midrash appropriates fragments of verse and does with them as it pleases. Boyarin presents us with a midrashic world full of inconsistencies, innovations, and “rebellions,” a world that is unlike the traditional world Gershon Shaked presents as a “reconciled world.”

If we adopt Boyarin’s conception of the Midrash, we can say that in these terms, Agnon is not, as Shaked defined him, a traditional revolutionary, but rather a natural successor of the Sages’ method of breaking down and reconstructing. Shaked’s argument that there is a contradiction between Agnon’s traditional style and the underlying themes in his works takes a turn when we become aware of the innovativeness of the traditional texts themselves—beginning with the Bible, through the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the Midrash. Agnon is indeed a “traditional revolutionary,” but in the reverse sense: while Shaked argued that Agnon adopted the style of the midrashic Sages and infused it with modern themes, I wish to argue that it was precisely the themes that Agnon adopted from the Sages, who themselves radicalized the use of verses by removing them from their original contexts, and that in terms of style, he was a radical vis-á-vis writers of his generation who chose to turn to the new and modern world.

Before I exemplify my argument—by way of both the midrashic text and the Agnonian text—I would like to address the significance and effectiveness of intertextuality as an agent of text preservation. In reference to the midrashic rabbis, Boyarin explains that it was precisely these Sages, who experienced the destruction of the First Temple and the ensuing spiritual void, who found in intertextuality an effective device for reconstruction and creation: this is how the Sages preserved the superior status of the biblical text, precisely by freeing it from its fossilized status— “...” The Sages’ intertextuality served as a means to appropriate the Bible, perhaps as a response to the parallel Christian attempt, precisely by extracting the verses from their original location and planting them in a new context. In the framework of a sacred text, this practice is radical because it functions in a space of creative license in which the text is often radically transformed, while at the same time, it maintains the sacred text’s relevance and authority by the simple fact that it leans on it. The Sages’ use of the intertextual device precisely in a period of destruction and ruin, and from within a deep fear of losing the sacred text, can, in my opinion, characterize Agnon’s writing as well. The texts of Agnon, who lived and wrote between two world wars and later in a world devastated by the demise and loss of both human beings and texts, are laden with intertextuality—perhaps precisely due to the urgency to preserve and reinstate what had survived in modern life.[[5]](#footnote-5) One can say that Agnon faces a double destruction—of the demolished Jewish world and of European culture after two world wars. Agnonian texts achieve this not by repeatedly citing the texts from within their original contexts to accommodate the narratives, but by removing the verses and relocating them in a new context in order to both explore them and formulate new ideas about the world from within them.

Now I will turn to one paragraph from Agnon’s novel *To This Day* to demonstrate how the intertextual chain I have mentioned operates. *To This Day*, which originally was titled *…*, describes the involuntary journey of a young man through the German home front of World War I until his return to the Land of Israel. The novel begins and ends with a story about the library of the late Dr. Levi, a room filled with books, but lacking a reader. The protagonist is sent to Dr. Levi’s widow to save the books; and so, at the end of the novel, he awaits their arrival in an empty house in the Land of Israel. The novel portrays a man straddling boundaries: a Jewish foreign subject on German soil, a man who was not recruited into the army and therefore lives in a predominantly female world, in search of a home, he wanders from one boarding house to another.

Given the short time left, I will limit my discussion to one paragraph at the beginning of the novel. In this brief example I wish to illustrate the way in which the intertextual chain functions and how this method—given its inherent confluence of innovation and subversion—preserves the ancient text while maintaining its supremacy and authority:

…

The paragraph describes the narrator sitting in his room in a boarding house, beginning with the sentence “When spring came again, I could feel my room getting smaller.” The expression “getting smaller” is found in Talmudic and midrashic sources in four different contexts. I will focus on the most prominent one for lack of time.

The expression “getting smaller” appears in the Babylonian Talmud in the Sanhedrin tractate:

…

The expression “getting smaller” appears as part of a debate on the anticipated coming of the Messiah. The tractate presents several opinions regarding signs indicating the coming of the Messiah, one of which is “...,” and in what follows “...” Rabbi Yohanan goes on to explain that there are two probable conditions for the Messiah’s arrival—in a generation that is innocent, that is when all the people are righteous, or in a generation that is guilty, when all the people are evil.

When we look at the Talmudic text, a fragment of which appears in the narrative paragraph, it seems that it too incorporates fragments of biblical texts. In this manner, an intertextual chain is created—starting with the Bible, through the Mishnah and the Talmud, up to Agnon’s novel. Although the framework of this lecture does not allow for an in-depth discussion on Talmudic intertextuality, I will note two important issues. First, the verses cited in the Talmud are drawn from various places in the Bible, and it appears that there is no narrative or causal connection between them. Their conjunction within the Talmudic debate provides each of them with an interpretation that differs from what can be understood in the original context. Second, it is important to note the distinctions between the two texts—the biblical and the Agnonian. Unlike Agnon’s narrative text, in which the reader is called upon to consider the identity of the words and texts from within which they operate, in the Talmudic text the verses serve as written proof, with the addition of a quote that defines them as such. Boyarin explains that this distinction between the poetic text and the midrashic text is external, and that what they have in common is intertextuality, which in both preserves and innovates “...”[[6]](#footnote-6) At this point Boyarin arrives at a conclusion regarding the encounter between narrative text and interpretation, which, in fact, is the underlying premise of this lecture—“...” The boundary between interpretation and literature is blurred, and the role of intertextuality in this obfuscation is central.

Now I will return to Agnon’s narrative text. The appearance of the Talmudic expression “getting smaller” in Agnon’s narrative causes the theoretical Talmudic dilemma to intersect with the protagonist’s real-life situation in the novel. This encounter necessitates a reconsideration of the Talmudic dilemma as well as an accurate reconsideration of the protagonist’s circumstance. This story, as I mentioned earlier, deals with a period preceding one of the most atrocious times in Jewish history. This is the moment prior to the catastrophe in Germany, a point when German Jewry was blind to political developments leading to World War II. In this extreme situation, the question of redemption arises all the more forcefully and troubles the writer and the reader, both of whom are aware of what is about to occur. The question of redemption surfaces both on the personal level of the protagonist, who is on the threshold of sin throughout the story, and on the national level represented in the description of German Jewry that, based on devout patriotism, send their sons to fight in a war that is not their own, unaware of what lies ahead in their country, in the homeland for which they are willing to risk their lives.

The Talmudic text, in which the expression “...” appears, intersects with Agnon’s narrative text, and whether consciously or not, this encounter creates an interesting discourse on the tension and boundaries between the private and the national, sin and redemption, and the diaspora and the Land of Israel. The Talmudic text ponders the way to redemption—is sin the way to redemption or does it represent a return to chaos, to destruction. From the very beginning of the novel, therefore, the expression “...” establishes one of the its central dilemmas—what will be the fate of the sinful man, or of the sinful nation? Is sin the way to catastrophe or to eternal redemption?

The dilemma constituted in the expression “...” and its meeting with the Agnonian text is resolved at the end of the novel. The protagonist, who is sitting in his new home in the Land of Israel, waiting for the books to arrive, summarizes his journey to the foreign land in these words: “...” Repeated several times, the word “...” stands out and seems to correspond with the same Talmudic text we encountered in the opening paragraph about the generation that “..., “...” The narrator ends his account with the words “...” It seems as if the narrator resolves the weighty dilemma on the essence of sin, and determines that the harrowing situation of the protagonist, and indeed of the entire Jewish nation, will lead to the impending redemption. The narrator employs words from the prayer of thanksgiving “Nishmat Kol Hai” (The soul of everything living)—he even uses them in the title of his account. However, a close look at the final paragraph reveals that his situation is far from ideal—a situation, which in turn, destabilizes the ideal notion of redemption. Unlike the ideal portrayal of a man who suffers from misfortunes and is redeemed by the benevolent God, at the end of Agnon’s novel, the speaker, who is in a house in which there are no books, waiting impatiently for books to arrive, describes himself as follows ”...” The setting is perfect, but the essence of the home is missing, the book. In this context, the novel’s title takes on a reverse meaning: instead of an optimistic statement of faith, by way of words derived from prayer, the title *To This Day* can be understood in the sense of an ending, of a final death that cannot be rectified or reversed.

*To This Day*, which is written from within a consciousness of destruction, begins and ends with books and the question of their place in Jewish culture. The book is first and foremost a symbolic representation of tradition, of the lost world. It represents a type of portable homeland for the Jew who seeks, in vain, a sense of belonging in foreign countries. In the novel, the attitude toward the written word, which infuses life in the world and in the Golem, is one of respect, and perhaps even anxiety in face of the future—what will a world look like in which books become fuel for fire, or retaliate against their creators—a manifestation of the subconscious of which the narrator cannot tell of himself. It seems to me that the intertextual methodology provides an answer to this anxiety. By way of the intertextual technique, of extracting words from their original context and planting them anew in a contemporary text, the texts provide one another with a new meaning and by doing so perpetuate their very existence. The anxiety in face of rooms without books, in face of a future world in which the book loses its power, is effectively expressed in the novel’s narrative content, however, the only way to fill the room with books is intertextuality, which destabilizes and preserves simultaneously.

So far, I have touched upon a single expression that appears in the narrative text, and have explained how two texts from different time periods and contexts intersect, and how this encounter facilitates a renewed discussion while each text illuminates new insights in the other. In what follows in the novel, many intertextual references appear that hint at the essence of the sin—references that appear as well in the texts we have discussed, and which, given the short time left, I cannot address at length. The expressions “...,” and “...,” as well as the word “...” all imply the sexual aspect of the bespoken sin, an aspect that is appropriate to the protagonist’s journey through the German home front as a Jewish man in a female-gentile space and the ways he copes with it. This is a story about a man in a feminine world, on the home front instead of the battle field, about a wandering Jew in a predominantly gentile world, a man with a foreign citizenship who emigrated from Palestine for a few years and “got stuck” in a foreign country. The erotic desire, which appears recurrently in this paragraph by way of textual fragments, will continue to accompany the protagonist throughout the entire novel in a delicate and implicit manner and through it, the protagonist will explore his boundaries and identity.

The intertextual process, which here is limited and particular, calls attention to the significant role of references in the reading process. These references openly anticipate what will be said in the unfolding narrative, heighten the sensorial experience elicited in its reading, and often even turn what is said openly upside down. The use of Talmudic and biblical texts in a story that is written during and in light of contemporary events, enables the texts to encounter one another, to communicate with one another, and to interpret one another, as well as the events themselves, in a revolutionary mode, which in itself preserves their authority and existence.

I wish to conclude this lecture—which dealt with the boundaries between literature and interpretation, between past and future, between the private and the national—with words from Agnon regarding the place of his corpus in the chain of sacred literature: “...”

1. Boyarin, Midrash Tanaim [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ben Porat, Ziva. “Intertextuality” [Heb.] *HaSifrut* 34 (2), 1985, 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a comprehensive review of the debate on Agnon’s innocence and objection to it see: Arbel, 2008, 175, and Barshai, Avinoam. *S.Y. Agnon in Hebrew Criticism: Summaries and Evaluations of his Works*. [Heb.] Tel Aviv: Shoken, 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Boyarin himself compares between the demise of European culture, which Walter Benjamin experienced after World War I, and the devastation that the Sages experienced after the destruction of the First Temple, and in this way explains Benjamin’s use of intertextuality in his writings. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. p. 51 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)