DRAFT

***Writing in Prose What Was Sung in Praise***

December 10th, Alfred Nobel’s 120th yahretzit, was the 50th anniversary of S.Y. Agnon’s receipt of the Nobel prize in Literature. the first – and to date only – Hebrew author so fêted. What was Agnon telling the Stockholm audience, and the world, about Jewish life and literature that day a half-century ago?

**by Jeffrey Saks**

S.Y. Agnon, well past the prime of his life and capped by his large black yarmulke, looking somewhat ridiculous in his white tie and tuxedo tails, ascended the stage to receive his Nobel Prize exactly fifty years ago. At the time he was the first Israeli and, to this day, the only Hebrew author so fêted. At the Nobel Banquet, standing before the King of Sweden and reciting the customary blessing prescribed by the Talmud upon being in the presence of royalty, Agnon declared that he felt compelled to explain who he was and from whence he—and his art—had sprung. What resulted, however, was a most remarkable description of Jewish history (and presumably his place within it) and the impact of the arc of that history on Hebrew literature and Jewish storytelling. In telling his life’s story he hearkened back nearly two-thousand years and said: “As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the Exile. But always I regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem.”

Agnon went on to explain that as a descendent of the Levites, the Temple choristers, he felt the destruction of Jerusalem most profoundly:

מתוך קטסטרופה היסטורית שהחריב טיטוס מלך רומי את ירושלים וגלה ישראל מארצו נולדתי אני באחת מערי הגולה. אבל בכל עת תמיד דומה הייתי עלי כמי שנולד בירושלים. בחלום בחזון לילה ראיתי את עצמי עומד עם אחי הלויים בבית המקדש כשאני שר עמהם שירי דוד מלך ישראל. נעימות שכאלה לא שמעה כל אוזן מיום שחרבה עירנו והלך עמה בגולה. חושד אני את המלאכים הממונים על היכל השירה שמיראתם שאשיר בהקיץ מה ששרתי בחלום השכיחוני ביום מה ששרתי בלילה, שאם היו אחי בני עמי שומעים לא היו יכולים לעמוד בצערם מחמת אותה הטובה שאבדה להם. כדי לפייס אותי על שנטלו ממני לשיר בפה נתנו לי לעשות שירים בכתב.

If taken at face value (and so little in Agnon should be taken only at face value), he is declaring that his literary gift and artistic output are some form of divine compensation and source of consolation for the tragedies of destruction and exile. Destined to be a singer of the Temple Psalms, but prevented from his destiny by the vicissitudes of history, he has been divinely tasked to write in prose what was formerly sung in praise.

In the Nobel speech as well as in a variety of other places in his writing–both in the guise of autobiography as well as outright fiction–he described that his very first composition came to him almost prophetically as a statement of poetic longing and lamentation for his beloved father, travelling on business to the regional fair, absent from the happy home in Buczacz in which young Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes (Agnon’s birth-name) was raised. This theme, that writing and storytelling becomes a balm for pain, runs throughout Agnon’s work. One need not be steeped in the working of Jewish midrash to understand that a little boy’s longing for his father might also be read on the national plane of Israel’s pining for its Father in heaven. This type of multi-layered writing (and reading) is at the core of Agnon’s genius, and why a writer who–on the surface—is so steeped in the “old world” of eastern European Judaism, can be simultaneously read and understood as one of the greatest modernist authors. In almost every case, if reading any of the stories in his collected writings leads you to think Agnon has merely piously retold an old hasidic tale, you are not fathoming what is written between the lines, nor are you hearing the ironic tones which accompany the work.

Perhaps no selection better demonstrates these themes than Agnon’s 1954 short story “Forevermore,” among his most enigmatic works, and the object of continual fascination for critics. It contains a compelling “story within a story” as the hero’s modern life in Jerusalem resonates with the ancient history that exercises a gravitational pull on the present. It is the story of a compulsive academic, searching for the “truth” that eludes him in his scholarly pursuits. Adiel Amzeh, that cloistered scholar, has been at work for twenty years attempting to unravel the secrets of an ancient city, now reduced to dust and ashes, and to uncover it he is willing to pay with his own life—a sacrifice he makes in the present in order to recover the past. “Forevermore” is an (unstable) allegory with meaning for today’s readers and contemporary Jewish history, and part of that meaning is encased in the symbolism of books, writing, nature of the artist calling of an author, and the relationship of all these to the “historic catastrophe,” and personal and national pain, alluded to in Stockholm in 1966.

“Forevermore” is a heroically tragic tale (at least it can support one such reading), and Amzeh’s encounter with the lost text he seeks can be read as a meta-reflection on Agnon’s view of books and reading, their power in our lives and the lives of nations and cultures, and their ability to harness their power to experience pain and draw consolation:

וכשהגיע עדיאל עמזה לסיפור זה זלגו עיניו דמעות. כמה גדולים מעשי סופרים, שאפילו חרב חדה מונחת על צוארם אינם מניחים את עבודתם ונוטלים מדמם וכותבים בכתב נפשם ממה שראו עיניהם.... ברית כרותה לחכמה שאינה מניחה מחכמיה והם אינם מניחים ממנה. הוא אמר מה לי ליגע עצמי? והיא החזיקה בו ואמרה לו שב אהובי שב ואל תניחני. היה יושב ומגלה צפונות שהיו מכוסים מכל חכמי הדורות, עד שבא הוא וגילה אותם. ולפי שהדברים מרובים והחכמה ארוכה ויש בה הרבה לחקור ולדרוש ולהבין, לא הניח את עבודתו ולא זז ממקומו וישב שם עד עולם. ("עד עולם", מתוך האש והעצים עמ' 332-333, 334).

The contemporary encounter with Agnon’s writing, its artistry, richness, complexity and sophistication, still has the power to demonstrate to the reader that Agnon was indeed one of the “great, true writers”—like that encountered so powerfully by Amzeh. I am often asked, usually by Israelis demonstrating their natural chauvinism for the most decorated Hebrew author, how anyone could possibly understand Agnon in translation? – How could that Nobel committee have recognized his greatness without encountering him in the original? For readers unfamiliar with the complex weaving of Agnon’s texts with the mastertexts of biblical and rabbinic literature, there is no doubt that much is lost in translation (as it is for contemporary Hebrew readers ignorant of those ur-texts—a contingency which was all too rare in Agnon’s heyday, and one whose current ubiquity would have caused him alarm). But for those concerned with the great issues of Jewish life, living, and learning—even at a remove of a half-century and more, the encounter with Agnon’s fiction still provides a compelling treatment of those themes, done so through the distillation of millennia of Jewish scholarship and storytelling, recast into the mold of modern literature. “Sit, my love, sit and do not leave me” those ancient texts call to us from between the lines and across the transformation they have undergone in Agnon’s writing.

*Yosef (Jeffrey) Saks, the Director of WebYeshiva.org, is the Series Editor of the Toby Press’ S.Y. Agnon Library and lectures at the Agnon House in Jerusalem.*