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MIDRASH AND MARGINALITY: THE "^{c}*AGUNOT*" OF S. Y. AGNON AND DEVORAH BARON

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If intertextuality, the evocation and activation of earlier texts within a given text, is a general condition of all literature, radical intertextuality, in which the earlier text is not only engaged but ironized or undermined, is particularly characteristic of modern Hebrew belletristic writing. During the renascence of Hebrew literature in the first decades of the last century, writers mined the cultural legacy for materials whereby to construct a modern language and literature. This collective endeavor generated authorial "conversations" around the Jewish cultural patrimony. Thus, for example, in Agnon's story, "עגונות" (^{c}*Agunot*), and Baron's story, "עגונה" (^{c}*Agunah*), each writer treats the theme of the "abandoned wife" through the manipulation of midrashic material. An ^{c}*agunah* is a married woman who is legally barred from marrying again, either because her husband has failed or refused to give her a divorce, or because he has disappeared leaving behind no conclusive evidence of his death. Within the midrashic tradition, this condition of עגינות (^{c}*aginut*) has been extended allegorically to describe the estrangement of the Jewish people in exile from the love and protection of their God. Both Agnon and Baron creatively engage this interpretation in their stories, and the specific manner in which each author chooses to de-allegorize traditional midrash—and the ways in which Baron's story may be read as a response to Agnon's—are the central concerns of this study. While this article focuses on Baron's work, attention is also devoted to those elements in Agnon's story from which Baron departs in her piece: in particular, how Agnon converts ^{c}*aginut* into an abstracted condition that applies to all mismatched souls irrespective of gender. Baron, in contrast, offers a different reading, one that assigns ^{c}*aginut* solely to the domain of women as a metaphor or metonymy for their oppression. The article considers the intertextual relationship between the two stories as well as the intersection of the lives of the authors. The discussion affords as well an opportunity to examine Baron's proto-feminist message, a message that has of late sparked increased fascination with her life and brought her work newfound attention as attempts are made to recover female, modernist forebears.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a central paradox regarding the life of Devorah Baron and the reception of her work. On the one hand, she was greeted in exultant terms from the very outset of her literary career by the leading members of the small international circle of Hebrew literati. Already at that time she was championed as the earliest distaff representative of the modern Hebrew author and held aloft as the female standard-bearer of the revived national literature. Upon her arrival in Palestine as a young woman of twenty-three,

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she assumed a role at the center of the nascent literary establishment as the literature editor for *הפועל הצעיר* (*Ha-Po^{c}el Ha-Tsa^{c}ir*), a journal that set the tone for much of the public discourse. However, even during the decades that followed her resignation from this post and her retreat from social involvement, she was not ignored by the literary establishment. Despite this self-imposed seclusion, Baron wrote her best works and published volumes of her collected stories, for which she was awarded several prestigious prizes.[1]

Throughout her life, Baron was thus able to maintain a position in the literary hub, and her enduring prominence is marked by the inclusion of examples of her work in all the standard anthologies of modern Hebrew literature. Nevertheless, the manner in which she was received was simultaneously and paradoxically an expression of her marginality. While this marginalization was in large part due to her own choice of social isolation, it was also a consequence of the fact that much of the attention accorded Baron was not strictly in recognition of her literary achievements. As the first important woman writer of modern Hebrew prose fiction, her work was spared the scrutiny—and therefore, perhaps, the serious attention—that would have been the lot of a male writer of similar talents. The major literary figures of the day—Brenner, Klausner, and Schoffman—all indulged her, but did so with a certain degree of paternalism. She was the "beneficiary," as it were, of a form of reverse discrimination that, while extolling the writer for her symbolic worth, simultaneously lessened the appreciation for her achievements as an artist. In this study, then, I would like to refocus attention on the measure of Devorah Baron's literary accomplishment by critically examining one of her early stories, "*^{c}Agunah*." The analysis will be lent greater cogency by reading her tale against the backdrop of Shmuel Yosef Agnon's "*^{c}Agunot*," the signature story of this preeminent figure within the modern Hebrew canon. Specifically, I want to explore the proposition that Baron's story is a response to Agnon's and one that engages his use of the *^{c}agunah* motif while offering an alternative usage of that trope. In doing so, I will be highlighting both authors' radical intertextuality, with special attention given to Baron's departure from the figurative reading given by Agnon, as well as to other innovative strategies she employs.[2]

[1] Most noteworthy of her publications was the large anthology *פרשיות* put out by the prestigious Mosad Bialik house. Baron received the Bialik Prize in its inaugural year for her second book of stories, *קטנות* (1933); the Rupin Prize for *לעת עתה* (1944); and the Brenner Prize for *פרשיות* (1951).

[2] On the larger phenomenon of the interpersonal and intertextual relations among early modern Hebrew authors, see Yitsḥak Bakon, *מתוך החבורה* (From within the Brenner-Gnessin circle) (Tel Aviv: Papyrus,

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Devorah Baron (1887–1956) was born in the town of Uzda in the Province of Minsk, Byelorussia. Her father, the town rabbi, was heavily influenced by Haskalah literature, and she was provided a background in the classical Jewish sources that was otherwise denied girls within traditional culture.[3] Her brother, Binyamin, four years her elder, recognized her talents and encouraged her quest for both religious and secular knowledge. Around the age of fifteen, Devorah joined her brother in Minsk; she then moved on to Kubana, where for the next several years she supported herself tutoring the children of prominent Jewish families while preparing herself for admission to the Gymnasium in Mariampol. Already during this period, she published works in Hebrew literary periodicals and attracted the attention of the most prominent Hebrew authors in Europe. Following the death of her father and the breaking off of her engagement to the writer Moshe Ben-Eliezer she left for Palestine in 1910.

Upon her arrival in Jaffa, Baron began work as the literary editor of *Ha-Po^c^el Ha-Tsa^c^ir*. Soon afterwards, she married its editor, Yosef Aharonovitz, a prominent social figure. During the First World War, the couple and their young daughter, Tsiporah, along with several thousand other non-Ottoman subjects in Palestine, were exiled by the Turks to Alexandria where they suffered much privation. Following the war, they returned to Palestine and the couple continued their work with *Ha-Po^c^el Ha-Tsa^c^ir* until the end of 1922 when they abruptly resigned their positions. While Aharonovitz continued his deep involvement in public life, from this point on, Devorah Baron confined herself to her apartment, never to leave it again. From the age of thirty-five until her death at the age of seventy, she carried on limited writing and related activities, corresponded with other literary figures, and occasionally received visitors in her home. During this "second half" of her life, Baron adopted an ascetic life, maintaining a strict vegetarian diet and abstaining from any entertainment, and spending her days lying on her couch. Following the death of her husband in 1937, she was confined mostly to bed and was cared for by her daughter, who devoted herself to fulfilling her mother's physical and emotional needs until Baron's own death in 1956.[4]

1982), in which he examines the relationship among Yosef Ḥayim Brenner, Uri Nisan Gnessin, and Agnon. See as well, Nurit Govrin, "בין אסון לישועה: פסילתו של גט בספרות העברית" (Between tragedy and salvation: The annulment of the divorce agreement in Hebrew literature), *Revue Européenne des Études Hébraïques* 1 (1996): 28–40. The author compares the treatment of this theme in Yalag's (Yehudah Leib Gordon) poem "קוצו של יוד" (1876) with short stories by three other writers: Agnon's "והיה העקוב למישור" (1912), "משפחה" by Baron (1933), and Yehudah Burla's "כהרף עין" (1943).

[3] Interestingly, however, she was the only one of the family's three daughters given such an education.

[4] For a detailed biography of Baron up to the point of her self-imposed isolation (including a discussion of

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Devorah Baron wrote some seventy to eighty stories; she was also known for her translations of world literature, especially the rendering into Hebrew of *Madame Bovary*. She composed approximately half of her stories as a young woman in Europe and, after her *ᶜaliyah*, in Palestine in the period before the family's exile to Alexandria. Baron, however, regarded her early stories with disdain, referring to them as "הסמרטוטים שלי" (*ha-smartutim sheli*, my rags), and was adamant in her refusal to have them reissued. Following Baron's death, her daughter Tsiporah noted

> ...the derisive and deprecatory attitude of D. B. towards the works of her youth, which she labeled "rags." She was vehemently opposed to the publication of a story or section of a story from those days, and upon the list containing the names of these works according to their date of publication she wrote several times the word—which she viewed as a sort of a everlasting final will—"rejected" (פסולים).[5]

The division of Baron's literary life is defined by the fact that everything published in the period after 1920 found its way into one of her books of collected stories. "*ᶜAgunah*," an early story, was exceptional in this regard; it was the last of seven such works that Baron chose to include in the "official corpus" of her work. "*ᶜAgunah*" was written at the tail end of this early period in her literary life, possibly during the period of the family's exile in Egypt.[6] The story was first published in the journal *מעברות* (*Maᶜabarot*) under the heading, "ממה שעבר" (From what has passed)—apparently part of a series of stories that was never realized.[7] It was anthologized under the title

the resignation from *Ha-Poᶜel Ha-Tsaᶜir*), see N. Govrin, "המחצית הראשונה: דבורה בארון—חייה ויצירתה, תרמ"ח–תרפ"ג" (The first half: Devorah Baron—her life and work, 1887–1923) in *קובץ דבורה בארון* (Devorah Baron: Miscellany) (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1988), pp. 11–338. Govrin uncovered the broken-off engagement with Ben-Eliezer and discusses its possible impact on her life. The last section of her study contains "The Second Half: An Outline for a Biographical Chapter That Was Not Written." For recent studies of Baron in English, see Wendy Zierler, "'In What World?': Devorah Baron's Fiction of Exile," *Prooftexts* 19 (1999): 127–150; and Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 67–101.

Indicative of the extent to which Baron remained loyal to her tradition (or limited by her illness) not to step foot out of her house was her inability to attend the funeral of her husband. As Dov Sadan, in a letter to Nurit Govrin, poignantly recounts: "I saw her descend three steps and return to her house" (Govrin, "המחצית הראשונה" [The first half], 272).

[5] *אגב אורחה: אסופה מעזבונה על ד. בארון ומסביבה* (Incidentally: Material concerning D. Baron and her surroundings collected from her literary remains) (Merḥavyah: Sifriyat Poᶜalim, 1960), pp. 9–10. This volume was edited by Tsiporah Aharonovitz following her mother's death. Significantly, nowhere in the book is the daughter's role as its editor mentioned, as though the daughter had chosen to erase herself—much as she did through her filial subservience to her mother.

[6] A possible Egyptian provenance for the story is hypothesized by Govrin based on the fact that Baron returned to Palestine on the twenty-third of Nisan 5679 (April 23, 1919), while the story appeared already in Nisan of the following year (Govrin, "המחצית הראשונה" [The first half], p. 283 n. 2).

[7] *מעברות* (*Maᶜabarot*) 1:6 (1920): 504–509. The heading given here was perhaps part of the long-delayed

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"*ᶜAgunah*" in *ספורים* (Stories, 1927), appearing later with slight changes in *מה שהיה* (That which was, 1939), and finally, again, with additional revisions in *פרשיות* (Tales, 1951).

S. Y. Agnon (1887–1970) was, of course, the leading figure within Hebrew letters during the twentieth century. Born Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes in Buczacz, Galicia to a pious and learned family, he emigrated at the age of nineteen to Palestine, where, aside from a prolonged stay in Central Europe from 1912–1924 he lived until his death. Awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1966, he is, in the words of Robert Alter, "the one Hebrew novelist who clearly belongs among the major modern writers of the world."[8] "*ᶜAgunot*" (1908) was the first story published in Palestine after his arrival there and was important in establishing his literary reputation.[9] This story already exhibits some of the predominant themes and techniques that were to characterize his writing throughout his life. Agnon himself was keenly aware of the importance of the story within his oeuvre. At the time of its publication, when asked by his editor, S. Ben-Tsiyon, to use a Hebrew name, he coined the pen-name, עגנון (*ᶜAgnon*)—a masculinized neologism derived from the story's title.[10] This name was later adopted in his personal life shortly after his return to Palestine from Europe. While the story is

plans to publish her first book (Govrin, "המחצית הראשונה" [The first half], pp. 258–263). Note that the subsection which this story leads off in *מה שהיה* (That which was) is entitled "מאז" (From then).

[8] Robert Alter, *Modern Hebrew Literature*, (New York: Behrman House, 1975), p. 179. For a recent comprehensive biography of the author, see Dan Laor, *חיי עגנון: ביוגרפיה* (Agnon's life: A biography) (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1998).

[9] The story originally appeared in *העמר* (*Ha-ᶜOmer*) 2, no. 1 (1908): 53–65. As this was the version Baron would have had before her while writing her story, all citations are to this edition. The story was revised twice by Agnon, in 1921 and 1931, and the latter version can be found in *אילו ואילו*, vol. 2 of Agnon's collected works, כל סיפוריו של ש. י. עגנון, 2d series (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1953), pp. 405–416. Baruch Hochman's evocative translation of this edition of the story (which I have adapted here) has been reprinted in Nahum Glatzer, ed., *Twenty-One Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1971), pp. 30–44; Robert Alter, ed., *Modern Hebrew Literature*, 175–194; and Alan L. Mintz and Anne G. Hoffman, eds., *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1995), pp. 31–47.

[10] In the later versions, Agnon, in fact, dedicates the story to Ben-Tsiyon, despite his initial ire at the revisions the editor made to the story. He gives voice to this anger in a letter sent a few months after the story's publication to Y. Ḥ. Brenner, at the time, editor of *Ha-Poᶜel Ha-Tsaᶜir*: "I trust that you will not add to my words and will not add any more tears to my well. For my mentor S. Ben-Tsiyon, who permitted himself in "*ᶜAgunot*" a little freedom and gave space to a narrowness of vision, thereby ruined my work" (שהתיר לעצמו ב-"עגונות" קצת ונתן מקום לצרי-עין לקפח מתוך כך את יצירתי) (Raphael Vayzer, "אגרות ש. י. עגנון אל י. ח. ברנר" [The letters of S. Y. Agnon to Y. Ḥ. Brenner] in *ש. י. עגנון: מחקרים ותעודות* [S. Y. Agnon: Studies and documents] [Jerusalem: Schocken, 1978], p. 43).

Anne G. Hoffman has commented on the significance of Agnon's change of name as marking the nascence of his literary life: "Agnon's derivation of his own name from the title of 'Agunot' makes us aware, from a historical perspective, of a space adjacent to the literary text where aspects of the artist's life are drawn into the fictionalizing process and take on a literary cast.... Agnon announces, in effect, the birth of the writer through the text whose author he is" (*Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991], p. 67).

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important in tracking Agnon's development as a writer and has been the subject of numerous interpretive essays, in this study the intention is to focus on Agnon's innovative allusive technique, specifically those elements which may connect it with Devorah Baron's story "*ᶜAgunah*." As the latter tale is much less widely known and available, in what immediately follows I provide an English translation of Baron's story according to the text of the original 1920 publication.[11]

From What Has Passed
I. *ᶜAgunah*
by Devorah Baron

It would usually happen on an autumn day. Outside, a cold rain falls—thin and ugly—seeping into the entrances of the gloomy shops, into the empty woodshed, and into the store of potatoes in the cellar below.

Trembling beside the house of the town doctor are a few solitary trees, 5 gloomy and bare-crested, which from time to time stretch their dry branches into the air and rap on the window shutters, on the cold surface of the window panes. In the middle of the market square, the water-hoist—dark, water-logged, and abandoned—is suspended over the well, and the slippery, moss-covered pail at its end drips its coarse drops into the puddle below as it 10 rocks back and forth, back and forth. Sorrow.

But behold, a traveler appears on the road leading to the train station—he and his stick and his little satchel, the satchel positioned under his arm. The road is indeed out, covered with mud and strewn with many obstacles, but no matter: this man is not a carriage-riding traveler who needs well- 15 maintained roads, but a poor wayfarer, "a teller of truths" and preacher, who proceeds on foot **by the sides of the road**, while under his arm is only a

[11] The original story may be found in "סיפורים: פרשיות מוקדמות תרס״ב–תרפ״א" (Early stories, 1902–1921), in *קובץ דבורה בארון*, ed. A. Holtzman (Devorah Baron: Miscellany), pp. 614–619.

For an alternative translation based on Baron's revised version—as well as a selection of other stories by Baron—see Naomi Seidman with Chana Kronfeld, eds., *The First Day and Other Stories* (Berkeley: University of California, 2001). "*ᶜAgunah*" appears on pp. 90–98.

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small satchel.

On passing by the row of shops, he pauses, struggles to pull out his thin purse from his breast, and buys himself a little snuff-tobacco. The shopkeeper fills his ivory box generously—all the way full up to the top, pressing it down with his fingers—and by the time the out-of-towner fumbles for and produces the coins from his purse, he is already standing and holding his stick out for him and asking him for events and news from the neighboring towns.

His only sermon the preacher will deliver yet today, between the afternoon and evening prayers will he give it. The tedium-afflicted schoolteacher, who peers out at him through the window, accompanies him with his gaze up to the synagogue's courtyard, and sends his pupils home early before evening falls.

—"Like cool water upon a tired soul"[12]—he reflects, as afterwards he trudges—pale and bent over—through the thin mud in the market square, while the hem of his coat flutters and waves back and forth in the wind.

In the vaulted, stingily-heated prayerhouse the transformation takes place right away, even before the afternoon prayer:

In place of the small lamp hanging in the room's western part above the Talmud scholars' table, the beadle now prepares another lamp, the one that is in front of the Holy Ark—a donation from the childless lord who dwells in the neighboring estate.

To the prayerhouse there arrive and gather now not just those who are scrupulous about participating in public prayer:[13] there come sunburned, hapless wagoners who have remained at home because of the roads being out; the blacksmith from over the bridge comes, and the young tailor who sews women's clothing.

The door opens and shuts, and opens again. The large cloth towel waves and passes from hand to hand, **and a different melody**, a new one, will be heard now in the flow of the water—the murky autumn water, which splashes and flows down intermittently from within the copper sink.[14]

Right after the afternoon prayer, the beadle lays the congregational prayershawl upon the altar, struggles to pull himself up on one of the stands, and lights the kerosene lamp. The large windows all around suddenly darken, the lone memorial candle is rendered superfluous and of no value.

[12] Cf. Prov 25:25: "Like cold water to a parched throat is good news from a distant land."
[13] In Jewish tradition it is deemed preferable to pray in the presence of a quorum of ten men.
[14] A description of the ritual handwashing prior to prayer.

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Shining, as if polished, the *shiviti*[15] rises up in all the splendor of its letters atop the Ark of the Law, and within the room the melody begins to murmur and flow—subdued, yea unsure and somewhat hoarse, but near and touching; O, how heart-touching.

King David, peace be upon him, comes and "**appears**" in the talmudic tractate *Berakhot*, he and his sweet lyre, that wonderful lyre that plays by itself,[16] and "Awake, O harp and lyre! I will wake the dawn"[17]—he gains strength like a lion, and gets up at dawn and pours out his prayer, the prayer of a poor man that he may be attired.

They come:

Aaron the Priest, the innocent one, the pursuer of peace, with his blossoming staff, the almond branch, in his hand—and bent-over Jeremiah who kneels under the suffering, this one whose innards **were parched** and whose eyes failed from tears, and he—he will seek out for himself a lodging place in the wilderness...

The Congregation of Israel is in agony—beaten, oppressed, tortured: "Every head is ailing and every heart is sick."[18] On each and every day the afflictions are renewed:

"We are hotly pursued; exhausted, we are given no rest." "All our enemies loudly rail against us"[19]—the excited Jew[20] takes out his handkerchief and wipes his high forehead, his eyes—while in the mind's eye of the gathered there arises and floats by the face of the fat-chinned and murder-drenched *oryadnik*, the town gendarme; the abuse of the inspection-clerk during his inspections within the shops; the drunken joy of the gentiles and the terrors of the pogroms on their holidays, the market days.

But—no matter:

Not forever will God forsake us—will the Holy One of Israel forget us.

"But have no fear, My servant Jacob, be not dismayed, O Israel for I am with you"—the Prophet from Anathoth[21] coaxes in his moist, weeping voice—and it is as if the darkness from beyond the windows pales and is no

[15] A sign typically placed in a place of prayer containing the words "I always observe (שויתי) the LORD before me" and used to focus the supplicant's concentration.
[16] The tractate that treats especially of "benedictions." The passage telling about David's magical lyre is found on page 3b.
[17] Ps 57:9 and 108:3.
[18] Isa 1:5.
[19] Lam 5:5 and 3:46.
[20] As in Yiddish, the Hebrew word "יהודי" (Jew), used here and elsewhere in the story in reference to the preacher, has the generic sense of "person" or "fellow." In the translation this has been rendered literally in order to preserve something of the original's flavor.
[21] I.e., the prophet Jeremiah. The verses cited are from 30:10 and 46:27.

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longer so terrifying.

Exile is bitter indeed and difficult, but—**temporary**, as a booth in a vegetable garden—"like a hut in a cucumber field."[22] **And the champions of**
85 **the righteous** do not keep silent:

From the Cave of the Machpelah ascends Abraham our Father, standing and declaiming his high-flown words, standing and defending his sons and pleading. After him, there appears Isaac with his "Great **Terror**,"[23] and Jacob with his "Trivial Effects":[24]

90 We have. They exist.

Moses Our Master complains and speaks convulsively—"Can it be?" And King David, even he does not keep silent. If there is need of it, also Rachel Our Mother herself appears.

Wrapped in light and enveloped in mourning[25]—from afar she spreads
95 her merciful hands, her pure maternal hands, tearing the Heavens with her protestations, to such an extent that the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He Himself does not restrain himself, withdrawing as it were to a corner, and He stands crying like a small boy...

And here begins the essence of the matter, the explanation and the
100 illumination—**the parable**.

A parable is told about a young and delicate princess who was married off to a king. And her husband cherished her, making for her lovely canopies and purple gowns and giving her precious gems and pearls, and he didn't remove himself from her until he made for her a kind of gown of gold,
105 which is called by the ladies a *ratondeh*.... Some time later, the king grew angry with her and proceeded to overturn on her the canopies, take her jewelry and her clothes from her, and he left her and went overseas.

And the neighborwomen would gather around her, shaking and nodding their heads at her as if to say: "Woe to her, to this wretched one—look at
110 what her husband has done to her." As for her, she sits desolate with dishev-

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[22] Cf. Isa 1:8.

[23] "פחדו הגדול": The term "Terror of Isaac" as a denomination for God is twice employed by the patriarch Jacob after Laban had overtaken him on the road to Canaan (Gen 31). In the first instance (v. 42), Jacob maintains that had not "the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the Terror of Isaac" been with him, Laban would have sent him off empty-handed. In the second instance (v. 53), Jacob swears "by the Terror of his father Isaac" to observe the international border proposed by Laban.

[24] הפכים הקטנים: Rashi, in his commentary on Gen 32:25 (and based on a passage in *Ḥulin* 91a), explains how it was that Jacob "remained by himself" after the biblical text has just mentioned that he and his entire entourage—along with all their belongings—have crossed over the Yabok River. Since the verse records that he took all his property with him, it must be that he returned only to take some "minor items" which he had forgotten. Jacob's remaining alone that night sets the scene for his transformative wrestling match with the anonymous adversary.

[25] Ps 104:2: "You [God] are clothed in glory and majesty, wrapped in a robe of light."

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eled hair, mourning at night and crying over what has befallen her—**crying until her eyelashes fall out**—the preacher lowers his voice and leans somewhat upon the stand, while the audience below gathers closer, draws near to the pulpit, to the storyteller—and all around there is a bating of 115 breath and silence.

From afar, from above the western wall, comes the sound of the large clock, which counts its beats one after another, and within the lamp the full flame slowly quivers and furtively hums its tranquil buzz of light. Silence.

Above, within the women's section, near-darkness prevails. Only through 120 the window-openings facing the eastern side do two or three lines of light penetrate and fall obliquely upon the walls, upon the cold shake-burning stove, and upon the box of Rabbi Meir the Miracle-Worker.[26]

Adjacent to one of these windows stands a single solitary "listener"—the old woman of seventy years, Dinah, the wife of the town judge, who came 125 with the passing of the day to recite the *Kedushah* and *Barekhu*. Her small head, set in a headscarf of black cloth, is tilted slightly to the side and is resting against the lintel of the window, and her two eyes incline **straight** at the mouth of the beloved Jew, who stands there on the pulpit below.

The scriptural verses and the words of the sages are indeed closed off and 130 uncongenial unto her feeble mind, as the slices of dry bread in her husband's house are unto her toothless mouth. But no matter: the sock with the hank of yarn is here with her in her hands, and so in the meantime she stands and knits.

She switches the metal needles now and again without any counting or 135 checking, without even looking at them: she knows the act of knitting by heart, as she does the *Kedushah* and the *Barekhu* which she has come to hear.

But now the preacher has adjusted his prayershawl, bent down and leaned carefully on the stand. He has reached the essence of the matter, the par- 140 able—and the wool sock slips and falls from her hand along with the yarn and the needles: The fate of the desolate *ᶜagunah* pierces and descends to the heart's depths:

Poor, tempestuous, unpitied—woe to her and woe to her life, woe to her

[26] The name of this figure is associated with various rabbis, most popularly with the *tanaʾ* (rabbi of the mishnaic period) Meir. A celebration is held at his grave in Tiberias on *Pesaḥ Sheini* (14 Iyar, the date set for those who due to ritual uncleanness or unavoidable absence from Jerusalem were unable to sacrifice the paschal lamb on the proper date, 14 Nisan), and he is venerated by both Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews. Beginning in the eighteenth century, charity boxes bearing this name were used to collect for causes in the Holy Land. See *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, s.v., "Meʾir Baᶜal Ha-Nes."

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and woe to her life—she shakes her gray head back and forth, back and
145 forth. A salty-bitter taste irritated her palate, a kind of **reflection** of the tears of the abandoned princess who sits and cries in the stillness of the night, and her two eyes—all the eternal and universal sorrow of the unfortunate **and justice-deprived** woman peers now from their pupils.

The preacher swims on, and in the meantime presses onward, onward.

150 After the parable comes the moral with the evidence and proofs from the Prophets and Writings:

Where is the bill of divorce of your mother whom I dismissed?—thus said the LORD.[27]

Yes—The LORD has called you back as a wife forsaken **and forlorn**. Can
155 one cast off the wife of his youth? For a while I forsook you, but with vast love I will bring you back....[28]

Once more the same somber melody, soft and somewhat hoarse, but now one senses already within it a trace of weariness and an intent to loosen the knots and stroke to reach the shore.

160 The large clock high on the wall strikes seven times with tones that are indeed hushed—but clear and full of warning:

The time for the evening prayer has already arrived.

One of the congregants coughs aloud, encouraging a second and third to follow suit. And the Jew gathers the edges of his prayershawl, whipping the
165 verses with vigor and strength, and slides and descends all at once like on the slope of a mountain.... And "a savior will come to Zion, speedily and in our days"—he sweeps the stand aside and takes off and folds the prayershawl.

The Rabbis' *Kaddish* is read rapidly and in a dry voice. After it will come
170 the *Barekhu* and the recitation of the *Shema*ᶜ, the whispering of the *Shemoneh ᶜEsreih* with the nervous hiccup at the end, and the sudden spitting of *ᶜAleinu*—and with the first opening of the door the moisture from outside bursts in and slaps their faces with all that it contains of the diseases of the infirm.

175 The beadle, after he has arranged the stands and placed them row upon row beside the benches, pauses a bit by the Ark of the Law, cleans and adjusts the memorial light, and stands and extinguishes the lamp.

The space grows suddenly dark, all at once, and upon the walls the shadows fall and quiver.

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[27] Isa 50:1.

[28] Isa 54:6–7.

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180 Above, into the women's section, there penetrates now just one feeble line of light, moving and quivering back and forth with the movement of the candle flame which is in front of the Ark of the Law below. The closing of the door below causes the window panes, the copper lamp in the middle of the ceiling, and the single, dangling flower on the headscarf of the judge's 185 wife to tremble.

She, the old woman, has already folded and gathered upon the bench before her the hank of yarn and the sock, but she has not yet left her place by the windows. From time to time, she stretches her head out the window, glancing about and searching among those leaving, but then she pulls it back 190 in. Something perturbs her and afflicts her soul, this much is clear. Only with the departure of the preacher himself does she move and grope her way slowly down the steps; but then, only then, does she remember that she has left the yarn with the sock upstairs on the bench—at long last she forgot and left them behind—and she sighs and returns to take them.

195 In her narrow, dimly-lit house, she moves about for a long while on the small surface between the table and the stove, scouring and rinsing the cooking utensils and placing them in one row upon the shelf, turning their openings facedown.

Finally she replaces her little headscarf with a white worn-out kerchief, 200 makes her bed while whispering the *Shema*^{c}, and lies down. The old bed creaks and moans under her body's ruins. With the extinguishing of the lamp, the space becomes completely dark. The cold penetrates through the cracks as though intensified and sharper. From the pile of potatoes by the side of the room there wafts a musty odor, a moist odor, unpleasant, like that 205 which on autumn mornings spreads over the ancestors' graves outside the town, and the old woman, upon turning her head to the wall—to the unshuttered window close by her, looks out onto the dark night clouds which peer from outside, and remembers how earlier the preacher had compared it to our lives—to the blackness of Exile in which we live.

210 For some moments, she lies motionless, with eyes half closed, as if ready to sink in slumber. But suddenly a light trembling passes through her heart, her whole body—and her palate is irritated again by the same salty-bitter taste, like that which saddened her beforehand during the sermon. And in an instant, she remembers that which had perturbed her and so afflicted her soul 215 there, in the prayerhouse—**the princess**.

And then she stirs, turns over slowly on her bed, and faces the side where her husband's bed would stand.

—Are you not asleep?—She stretches out a lean arm to the air—and her

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voice trembles and falls as she speaks —**You** must have fathomed the depth
220 of his words, there, in the prayerhouse—what happened in the end to **that one**...to the *ᶜagunah*? Did he return to her afterwards...the husband? Did he return...?

No response is forthcoming. He, the old man, **is not** asleep, but he will not give an answer.

225 —Such is **their way** from time immemorial—she nods, seemingly, to the wondrous **princess**, meaning **men** in her reference to **their**. And once more she rolls over and turns her face to the wall—to the window.

In the house there prevailed a chill and a musty odor, a moist odor, unpleasant, like that which will spread on autumn mornings over the ancestors'
230 graves outside the town, and the night which peers through the window from outside is black, O how black.

2. AGNON'S "ᶜAGUNOT"

While Agnon's signature story is well-known to readers of Hebrew literature, for purposes of comparison, let us rehearse the progression of its plot. The story opens with the citation of an allegory in which the deeds of the people of Israel are likened to a thread woven by God Himself into "a cherished טלית (*ṭalit*, prayershawl), of grace and kindness throughout." Wrapped in this *ṭalit*, the Congregation of Israel—here cast in the feminine singular as כנסת ישראל (*Kneset Yisraᵓel*)—shines forth at times of sabbath and holiday celebration even in the lands of the Diaspora—"as in Days of Yore when she was a young girl in her father's house." However, "it sometimes happens" that the thread is broken and the shawl is damaged; evil winds tear it to shreds, and as befell Adam and Eve after their sin, all grow ashamed of their nakedness. The Congregation of Israel becomes then like the distraught Shulamite of the Song of Songs who wanders searching in despair for her departed lover—God. This lovesickness of the spurned Congregation of Israel deforms her, leaving her disgraced as an "אישה מופקרת" (*ishah mufkeret*, a wanton woman) in the eyes of all. This abject situation is relieved only when a spirit from above stirs the people to good deeds, and they are once more able to stretch out the thread for God to weave.[29]

This "midrash" is the lead-in for the story proper, introduced merely as the transcribed work of an anonymous author. The tale that follows, the מעשה

[29] "*ᶜAgunot*," 53. In the final version of the story, the Congregation of Israel's glow is not restricted to holidays and sabbaths; nor does Agnon retain the description of its final state of degradation as an "unchaste woman."

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(*ma^c aseh*), is to be viewed by the reader as an instantiation of the allegory presented in this midrashic preamble. As the narrator states: "And it is this [that is, the preceding allegory] that the author had in mind in relating the following tale." By presenting the tale as an extended quotation of an anonymous source, the narrator is able to distance himself and maintain ostensive objectivity in the eyes of the reader.[30] Moreover, Agnon specifies no particular time-period for the tale, which reinforces its mythic and hoary origins and the universality and diachronicity of its message. Wealthy Aḥiezer has recently arrived in Jerusalem from the Diaspora with the intent of instituting social, economic, educational and religious reforms that will uplift the people and prepare the way for the שכינה (*Shekhinah*), the Divine Presence, to return to Zion. While we learn from the narrator at the very outset that his attempt will ultimately end in failure, God is asked not to judge Aḥiezer harshly for his efforts.

The story proper begins with our being introduced to Aḥiezer's only child, the beautiful and modest Dinah. When the time comes for her to be married, Aḥiezer arranges a match for Dinah to Yeḥezkel, a brilliant young Talmudist from Europe. With the groom found and all proceeding as planned, Aḥiezer orders built a yeshivah where Yeḥezkel will teach the disciples who will flock to learn at his feet. To further honor his future son-in-law and in order that the great scholar's place of prayer will not be distant from his place of study, Aḥiezer also has constructed an adjoining sanctuary. He commissions one Ben Uri to make the chapel's crowning glory—the Ark that will house the Torah scrolls—and sets aside a studio for him in the house. Despite the fact that Dinah is now already betrothed to another, the melodies Ben Uri sings as he sets about his work are an irresistible attraction, and she falls magically in love with the artist. At first he returns her romantic interest—but once he is engaged in fashioning the Ark, Ben Uri becomes so absorbed in his creation that he eventually forgets her. Ben Uri literally pours his soul into the Ark; once it is completed he goes out into the garden to restore himself. Instead of regaining his strength, however, the spiritually depleted artisan is overcome by melancholy and his thoughts turn again to Dinah, to whom he now wishes he could pour out his heart. In the meantime, Dinah, yearning to hear Ben Uri's voice and see him, goes in search of him. Entering the studio, she finds not the artist but only the completed Ark. A resentment born of intense envy overcomes her as "Satan

[30] On the poetics of quotation as an allusive technique, see Meir Sternberg, "Proteus in Quotation-Land: Mimesis and the Forms of Reported Discourse," *Poetics Today* 3 (1982): 107–156.

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pours jealousy into her heart," and extending her arms "as if they had a will of their own," she topples the Ark out the window and down into the garden.

When the Ark is discovered in the garden, the community reviles its maker who has inexplicably disappeared—while the town rabbi orders the desecrated object stored away. On the very day on which the wedding between Dinah and Yeḥezkel is to occur, Dinah comes before the rabbi to receive the traditional bridal blessing. Moved by her shame, she not only confesses to the rabbi her act of vandalism, but also divulges to him the love she bears for Ben Uri. The rabbi, shocked and bewildered, but concerned that she "fulfill her role as a mother in Israel," says that God forgives all brides on their wedding day, and seeks to endear the groom to her. In the meantime, when the rabbi sends to retrieve the Ark from the storeroom, it too, like the artist, has mysteriously vanished.

The wedding of Yeḥezkel and Dinah takes place as arranged, but no happiness ensues for the couple: he pines away for his true love whom he has left behind in Poland, while Dinah remains obsessed with the missing craftsman. Eventually, the couple will come before the rabbi for a divorce. In the story's denouement, we are told that the very day on which marriage is dissolved, the wealthy Aḥiezer departs with his daughter for Exile. The rabbi, in turn, has a series of dreams from which he understands that he too is condemned to Exile for his role in sanctioning the marriage. He leaves behind his own family, wandering from place to place, seeking atonement for his error by engaging in the matching-up of souls, "to redeem the forsaken in love" (תיקון עגונות, *tikun ᶜagunot*). The story concludes with various anecdotal sightings of this rabbi in the Diaspora and recent reports that he is in the Holy Land.

3. Agnon and the Manipulation of Midrash

Radical intertextuality, the subversive manipulation of allusive connections to earlier texts, is one of the defining features of Agnon's work.[31] The ancient exegetical interpretation of the Song of Songs reads this erotic biblical poem as an allegory of the deep love between God and Israel.[32] Basing

[31] For an excellent discussion of the general intertextual proclivity of modern Hebrew literature and the synergistic relationship between literary theory and practice in the Israeli context, see Chana Kronfeld, "Allusion: An Israeli Perspective," *Prooftexts* 5 (1985): 137–163; and in particular, her discussion of Ziva Ben-Porat's interactive model of intertextuality.

[32] As found throughout the aggadic midrash of *Shir hashirim raba* (Palestine, ca. sixth century C.E.). Historically, there was opposition to the Song being included in the scriptural canon due to its explicitly secular and erotic nature. Its incorporation was solidified only in the second century C.E. when Rabbi Akiva made his famous declaration that "all writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies." By

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himself on this classical midrash, Agnon has put forth his own "pseudo-midrash" complete with the citational formula: "מובא בכתובים" (*muvaʾ baktuvim*, It is brought down in the writings...). However, in his reworking of the midrash— actually a composite that he has formed from diverse traditions—Agnon has displaced the traditional exegetical focus, shifting it to the Shulamite's frustration at failing to find her lover in order to signify the misery of the historical experience of Jewish diasporic existence.

While the sad result of the people's estrangement from divine favor is clear, left unspecified in Agnon's allegory is the precise nature of the sin that leads to the rending of the prayershawl. The narrator merely relates that "it sometimes happens that some impediment creeps up and interrupts the flow of the thread." Such narratorial reticence conforms to the prevailing traditional Jewish cultural norm of not dwelling on the misdeeds of the people. (A similar etiquette is reflected as well in the prophylactic interjection—ליצלן רחמנא (*raḥmanaʾ litslan*, "May the Merciful One save us")—that is immediately appended to this statement.) However, by not specifying the reasons for the catastrophe, Agnon simultaneously allows for multiple possibilities—interpersonal, spiritual, and national—as the plot plays out in the main body of the story. This open question of causality in some ways parallels the homiletic structure of the traditional sermon, the דרשה (*derashah*), where a verse is cited at the beginning of the sermon—often from the Prophets or Writings—and then the preacher connects it up somehow with the Torah reading for the day. Much of the narrative tension results from the audience's suspense as to how the seemingly unrelated verses will be joined. Here, in like fashion, we are told at the outset that Aḥiezer's plans will come to naught, but we will have to wait to find out how the par-

adopting an allegorical interpretation, the rabbis were able to read the eroticism out of the text while simultaneously reading in a divine element that is otherwise entirely absent. According to the allegorical reading propounded by R. Akiva, the protagonists of the story were identified not as human lovers, but the groom was to be seen as God and the bride represented the people of Israel. In the Targum and Midrash this interpretation is expanded, and an entire history of biblical Israel is ventured. Christians also inherited this allegorical trend, viewing Jesus as the bridegroom and the Church the bride. In medieval times, this allegorical understanding gave way to an individual-mystical one in which the bride and groom stood for the human soul and the divine beloved, respectively. See *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, s.v. "Song of Songs, Book of." For a contemporary example of this sanitizing approach, see the ArtScroll interpretation of the book: *The Song of Songs: An Allegorical Translation Based upon Rashi with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources*, trans. Meir Zlotowitz (Brooklyn, NY: 1986). According to the ArtScroll website, this is "the first English translation faithful to the allegory that is the Song's authentic meaning." For a translation and interpretation that is more philologically and contextually grounded, see Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Random House, 1995), whose rendering into English is the basis for the translations presented here.

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ticular concatenation of events will lead to that end, which in hindsight will shape our understanding of the original verse.

On one level, then, Agnon engages in a critique of the emphasis on external and material factors—wealth, status, and beauty—that are the *sine qua non* of the arranged marriage, the שידוך (*shidukh*). It is conformity to social norms and the denial of spiritual attractions that result in mismatches and a state of figurative *ᶜaginut*. The implied image of the Shulamite harassed and beaten by the guards (Song 5:7) for "following her heart"—searching for her beloved—constitutes a use of a traditional text to criticize a traditional practice by documenting the unhappiness that results from marriages based neither on love nor on spiritual affinity. Thus, within the midrashic form tension is created, setting up the elaboration of a new content.

While Ben Uri and the Ark are the first to disappear, eventually all are banished from the Holy Land, this Garden of Eden *in potentia*. In accord with the parable of the prayershawl, all quickly unravels and each of the protagonists is condemned to wander in Exile for his or her role in denying the primacy of the spiritual in the aligning of couples. Ben Uri, the "correct" match for Dinah, is a "mere" craftsman and thus beneath her station; she, as a rich man's daughter, merits a glorious scholar. Rabbi Yeḥezkel has left his true love, Fradil, behind in Poland. Both Yeḥezkel and Dinah both share an aristocratic background, one by dint of his learning, and the other due to her father's wealth and her refined upbringing. Reflecting the most likely etymology of the name of the Song of Song's female protagonist—the Shulamite, she is referred to as "a daughter of Jerusalem"; similarly evocative of this character and her privileged background is the narrator's Dinah, a בת נדיב (*bat nadiv*, an aristocrat's daughter) calling as the identical collocation appears in The Song. In contrast, Fradil, like the artisan, comes from humble origins and lives a socially marginal existence. Dinah's father, Aḥiezer, is directly responsible for the mismatch; she is referred to more than once as "his daughter, his only child"—a clear allusion to the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22 and Abraham's willingness to offer up "his son, his only child" in sacrifice.

The artisan bears the patronymic of Bezalel ben Uri, the fashioner of the Israelite Sanctuary in the desert. Bezalel was chosen by God to oversee the construction of the Tabernacle (Exod 31:1–11; 35:30–39:43). The most important of this entire complex of Temple structures was the Ark, which was to contain the two stone tablets of the Decalogue. God fills Bezalel with a divine spirit to carry out his work; thus his namesake in Agnon's story represents the creative artist—and Agnon himself—engaged in sacred aesthetic

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pursuits. Ben Uri fails to achieve spiritual union with Dinah because of his obsessive involvement with his work on the Ark. Eventually his absorption with his creation will leave him drained (impotent?) "like an empty vessel" (p. 56). Dinah dreads her upcoming marriage to Yeḥezkel, and despite her one great act of rebellion—pushing the Ark out the window—in the end accedes to social pressures and silently accepts her role as a "mother in Israel."[33] Yeḥezkel remains in love with the housekeeper's daughter, continuing to see her image before him even as he seeks to concentrate in his devotions.

Yeḥezkel's father, who has come from Poland for the nuptials, sees only Dinah's surface qualities, and fails to question this focus on externalities when trying to figure out why his son is so unhappy: "What might his son be lacking here? Here were God's blessing, wealth and renown, a wife comely and modest, and a lovely home fit for a king—so where then was his contentment?" (p. 61). In this passage, Dinah (unnamed!), sandwiched between a catalogue of purely material possessions, is reduced to the status of an object, and one noted only for her beauty and moral rectitude; the lack of any metaphysical, emotional or spiritual connection is of no concern to her father-in-law. This depersonalization of Dinah is signaled as well by Agnon's delay in revealing her name in the story; it is not given until the second chapter when she overhears Ben Uri singing and falls in love with him "as though a spell had been cast." It is thus indicated that only through true romantic love does she possess an identity.

The Ark represents both the aesthetic and the sacred, and is the only "character" in the story to speak out, as it were, against arranged marriages. While grammatically the Hebrew word for Ark, ארון (*aron*), is masculine, in a striking passage, it is depicted anthropomorphically as a young woman who has been abandoned by her husband (in this case, God). The lone voice of the Ark/*ᶜagunah* appeals to her divine husband to have mercy on the couple. Too ashamed to utter His name, she is constrained to offer up a silent prayer in protest over the separation of Dinah and Ben Uri. In support of her cause, her breasts—represented by the Tablets of the Law adorning the front of the Ark—are born up to her Husband in Heaven. She bemoans how Dinah and Ben Uri have been cast out like Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, and asks why He does not take pity on them and unite her soul with the artisan's body:

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[33] Yalag also depicts Bat-Shuᶜa in a similar submissive fashion, as a "modest and compliant Daughter of Israel." See Govrin, "בין אסון לישועה" (Between tragedy and salvation), pp. 30–32.

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> ...and the Ark was like a young woman with outstretched palms and a noiseless prayer in her mouth; she is as yet too ashamed to mention her husband's name, but her two breasts—the two Tablets of the Covenant—rise up and are borne along in supplication with her heart to God in Heaven: "Master of the Universe! This soul which You have breathed into him, You have taken from him, so that now he is cast before You like a body without its soul. And pious Dinah over there, this disembodied soul—why do You not fill his body with this soul? Till when shall the souls in Your world be estranged (תֵּעָגֵנָה, *tei*ᶜ*ageinah*) from each other and the service of Thy habitation sound out in suffering and dread?" (p. 58).[34]

The Ark's protest elicits a response from God in the form of a בת קול (*bat kol*), a voice from Heaven, but it is cut off by the people arriving to celebrate the wedding of Dinah and Yeḥezkel, and so the plea goes unanswered. The Ark of Holiness, the ארון קודש (*aron kodesh*), becomes instead an ארון מתים (*aron meitim*), "an ark of the dead," a coffin, while the manor grounds, evoking the gardens of Eden and the Song of Songs, are transformed into a cemetery. Moreover, just as according to the midrash the distraught Congregation of Israel will come to be viewed as a "wanton woman," so too the townspeople will shun the Ark and take its fall as an omen of divine rejection.

In the passage cited above, Agnon employs the identical form of the verbal root of ᶜ*agunah* as it appears in its sole biblical occurrence in the Book of Ruth. Agnon's direct engagement of this passage is significant, as there, too, the word does not carry its later halakhic connotation of a woman who is prevented from remarrying due to the disappearance of the husband or his failure to grant a divorce. In the context of Ruth, the word connotes the sense of being "bound up" to someone, and thereby not permitted in marriage to another. In fact, both of Naomi's widowed daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, have lost their husbands to death. The "husbands" to whom they are bound are not flesh-and-blood spouses, but the hypothetical offspring their mother-in-law invokes in a rhetorical flourish. In Naomi's impassioned address to her sons' widows, she implores them not to continue accompanying her as she makes her way back to Bethlehem from the Land of Moab:

[34] In this version of the story (but not in the subsequent versions), the word תעגינה is followed by זו אל זו—"to each other"; i.e., that souls will be in a state of reflexive and metaphysical עגינות with regard to each other. Hochman translates תעגינה somewhat freely as "suffer the death of his life." He also translates אוזלה ערטילאה as "has gone forth naked into exile," but נשמות דאזלין ערטילאין is a kabbalistic term referring to disembodied souls, a name for the souls of sinners that stray and wander in the world of primordial chaos (תהו) until they find their restoration (תיקון). See Even-Shoshan, המילון העברי המרוכז, s.v. "אזל". In the revised versions of the story there is no attempt by God to answer the Ark's/the ᶜ*agunah*'s complaint.

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> "Turn back, my daughters, why should you go with me? Do I have any more sons in my womb that can be husbands for you? If I were to harbor hope, and I became betrothed this very night to a man and then gave birth to sons, would you wait for them to grow up? Would you bind yourselves (תֵּעָגֵנָה, *tei^cageinah*) to not having a husband for them...? Do not, my daughters, for I am deeply grieved on your account, for the LORD's hand has gone out against me" (Ruth 1:12–13).

The arrival of the wedding day is ironically marked in Agnon's story by language from the Song of Songs ("the time of the doves has come"), while the expectation surrounding the arrival of the groom and the wedding procession is described in florid language and dramatic cadences associated with the arrival of the male lover in the Song. And yet, a sense of gloom overshadows the people's attempt to put on a good face. Sadness itself is personified standing under the wedding canopy, the חופה (*ḥupah*), even "seeking to tear the covering of the *ḥupah* from above their heads." Traditionally, this covering would consist of a *ṭalit*; thus, its tearing is a clear analogue for the damaged prayershawl torn by the רוחות (*ruḥot*)—the evil winds/spirits—of the preamble. In contrast to the radiant white prayershawl of the midrash, the black silk פרוכת (*parokhet*, mantle) of the Ark cast down in the garden is portrayed as a shroud upon which the moon traces a silvery web-like Star of David. This imagery is returned to once more at story's end when the Divine Presence, the very *Shekhinah* which Aḥiezer sought to bring back to Zion, appears to the rabbi in a vision as a beautiful woman garbed in black, pouring forth tears and shaking her head at him.[35]

Clearly, Agnon here has departed from the traditional allegorical reading of the Song of Songs; its imagery is utilized not as signification for the love between God and Israel, but to connote the affinity between true soul-mates. Aḥiezer had grand plans to arrange a perfect match for his daughter. Passing over local talent, he sent his emissaries to search the world over for a distinguished Torah scholar, and then proceeds to build him a grand study and sanctuary.[36] However, the match is doomed to fail because he looks only

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[35] The transformation of the garden into a cemetery is made explicit in the first version of the story: "...And the Ark appeared unto them fallen behind the window and cast out in the courtyard like a dead person..." (p. 58). Compare this plea by the Ark with the later versions of the story in which God is portrayed as the father, thereby negating a reading in which the Ark is an *^cagunah* pleading with her husband, God.

[36] Similarly, Yeḥezkel's father's preoccupation with material comforts contrasts with the Song of Song's focus on love as a bodily impulse that cannot be bought, bribed, revoked through the censure of others, or even induced to exert its force before it is ripe. Typical of the Song's critique of a purely materialistic conception of love is verse 8:7: "If a man tried to buy love with all the wealth of his house, he would surely be despised."

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at externalities and ignores the inner qualities that could be the basis for aligning true spiritual pairs. *ᶜAginut* for Agnon then, is an anchoring to the traditions and social norms at the expense of the inner soul. Those who fail to find their match, who remain consumed by the externalities of wealth, position, and even aesthetic creation, are condemned to eternal exile. "*ᶜAgunot,*" like the Song, is set in Jerusalem, but the movement of the characters is restricted to the estate of Aḥiezer, and the initial optimism of the plot's proceedings is precipitously overturned. In the Song, the Beloved has "gone down to his garden to the beds of spices to graze in the garden and gather lilies" (6:2). So too, Ben Uri after finishing his work makes his way to the garden, but he has been left soul-less; Dinah, in her passivity so much the opposite of the Shulamite, will not seek after him there. After the Ark is cast out the window, instead of the scene described in the Song of "blossoms springing up from the earth" (2:12), the flowers in Aḥiezer's garden lean over the Ark in mourning. The portrayal of the Ark lying in the garden contrasts with the depictions of the Shulamite's vitality and sexuality in the Song. At the same time, Agnon makes use of the Rabbis' allegorical and atomistic interpretation of her body parts—specifically, the sanitizing description of the Shulamite's breasts as representing the two Tablets of the Covenant—to underscore the pathos and justice of her claim against God.[37]

On one level then, *ᶜaginut* comes to symbolize the unhappiness of those who are denied union with their proper mate because they are bound to another. However, in line with the polysemic nature of midrash, the relatively open nature of its interpretation of Scripture, the story invites alternative readings. While exoterically the story is about the failure of arranged marriages and seems to indicate a negative view of the institution, in other works of Agnon (for example, "The Doctor's Divorce") we see a positive appraisal of the *shidukh*. If we look elsewhere for the tenor of this metaphor, the condition of *ᶜaginut* depicted in the story may also be an implicit comment on the failure of an ideology: What begins as an attempt to resettle the Garden of Eden/Jerusalem with allusions to the Song of Songs ends with Exile and the verses of Ecclesiastes. Aḥiezer's hubris in attempting to settle in the Land and "לתקן שם תקנות גדולות" (*letaken sham takanot gedolot*, to enact there great measures) (p. 53) comes to an inglorious end. In brilliant symmetry, Agnon has the rabbi end up wandering in גלות (*Galut*,

[37] See Rashi's commentary on Song 7:3. For an analysis of the Song's body imagery from a gender-critical perspective, see the article by Fiona K. Black, "Unlikely Bedfellows: Allegorical and Feminist Readings of Song of Songs 7:1–8," in *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, eds. Athalya Brenner and Caroline R. Fontaine (Sheffield, United Kingdom: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 4–129.

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Exile) for the purpose of uniting mismatched and wandering souls—תיקון עגונות (*tikun* ^{c}*agunot*).

Arna Golan has cogently argued that the story needs to be read against the historical backdrop of the Second Aliyah as a critique of attempts to settle the land.[38] Viewing the story in this way reveals something of Agnon's own complicated position regarding immigration to the Land of Israel. Unlike his contemporaries who set their stories in Palestine of the period, or who—like Baron—chose to ignore it nearly altogether, Agnon dealt with the topic obliquely. He also departed from many of his peers by seeking not only a national solution to the perilousness of Jewish existence, but also a much deeper spiritual redemption. The connection between the tale and the author's own ^{c}*aliyah* (which immediately preceded the writing of this story) is evident. Moreover, with the story's conclusion of return to *Galut*, Agnon presciently predicts his departure four years later from Palestine back to Europe. By placing the story in a setting that is clearly not contemporary, nor attributable to any specific time-period, he imparts a timeless and mythic quality that camouflages any ideological intent. Clarifying the larger message of the tale is the story frame, consisting of the preamble and the epilogue. The body of the work, the *ma*^{c}*aseh*, is a legendary tale, and these circumscriptive sections connect it up with the national redemption promised by Zionism. This theme is more finely stated in Agnon's revisions of the story in which he reduces its romantic quality in favor of greater ironic restraint.

The *Kneset Yisra'el* (Congregation of Israel), while grammatically singular and represented metaphorically by the vehicle of the abandoned wife, is here to be read literally as the Jewish people collectively. Reading backwards to the preamble we understand that the punishments of both the naked Shulamite searching for her lover and of Adam and Eve cast out of the Garden are allegories for the failure of the story's protagonists to settle in the Land. On the interpersonal level, the shame Adam and Eve first sense following the sin is paralleled by that felt by both Dinah and Yeḥezkel as their hearts incline toward their forbidden loves instead of towards each other. The aristocratic *pater familias* Aḥiezer has proceeded with his aim of pre-

[38] Arna Golan, "הסיפור 'עגונות' והעלייה השנייה" (The story "^{c}*Agunot*" and the Second ^{c}*Aliyah*), *Moznayim* 32, no. 3 (Feb. 1971): 215–223. Agnon returns to this theme in *תמול שלשום* (Only yesterday) telling the story of another figure who immigrated to Palestine in the years before World War I: "Like our other brethren, the people of our redemption, those of the Second Aliyah, Yitsḥak Kumer left his land, his homeland and his city and went up to the Land of Israel, to build it from its ruins and to be built from it (S. Y. Agnon, כל סיפוריו, vol. 5, p. 7).

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paring the way for the messianic age. In seeking a suitable match for his daughter he has spurned all local suitors and sent his emissaries to seek a son-in-law in the Diaspora. The biblical precedent (Gen 25) consists of Abraham, residing now in the Land of Canaan, sending his servant Eliezer back to their ancestral homeland in Haran to seek out a bride for "his one and only son." Aḥiezer has, in a way, betrayed the Land of Israel, ארץ ישראל (*Erets Yisraʾel*), by importing a groom from the Diaspora. On this reading, the failed relationship of Dinah and Yeḥezkel comprises an allegory within an allegory, the *shidukh* symbolizing this ill-fated attempt to force a relationship between the People and the Land without any regard to spiritual matters. We are left to wonder what actions on the part of the Jewish people it will take to restore the *ṭalit* and bring about national redemption.

In fashioning this tale, Agnon may have been inspired by the model of an earlier story of an ill-fated attempt to effect the Redemption—"The Story of Rabbi Joseph della Reina." This figure was the subject of the earliest published work by the fifteen-year-old Agnon, a poem in Yiddish bearing the title of this protagonist.[39] The kabbalistic tale, which was the source for this effort, similarly relates the failed attempt of the hero to bring salvation to his people. In the poem, della Reina attempts to overcome Satan so that the Jews will be able to live in great comfort in their land. The connection between the tales of della Reina and Aḥiezer is signaled at the story's outset by the quotational technique that Agnon employs which parallels that of the earlier story. That legend begins:

> There is an awesome story of Joseph della Reina, who was a great man, versed in the skills of the Practical Kabbalah, who dwelt in the city of Safed in the land of Galilee. One day he resolved to insist upon bringing the Redemption and remove the rule of wickedness from earth.[40]

Compare this with the beginning words of "*ᶜAgunot*":

> A great and wondrous tale from the Holy Land about one eminent man of wealth, the honorable Reb Aḥiezer, who set his heart on ascending from the Diaspora to the Holy City, Jerusalem, may she be rebuilt and established, so that he might institute therein great reforms among the community, raise up the horn of his people that they may make a respectable living, magnify the Torah and exalt it in Israel, and restore somewhat the ruins of the anteroom until we merit its becoming a glorious mansion for when the Holy One

[39] "*Rabi Yosef Dela Reina*," in *Yidische Verk* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1977), pp. 3–7. Originally published in *The Yudishes Vokhenblat* (Stanislav) 1, no. 8 (July 17, 1903).

[40] See Micha Joseph Bin Gorion, comp., *Mimekor Yisrael: Classical Jewish Folktales*, abridged and annotated edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 312–319.

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Blessed-be-He returns His presence to Zion—may it occur speedily and in our days!

This too, then, will be a tale in which the hero seeks to advance the messianic era. However, instead of doing so by resorting to the Practical Kabbalah (הקבלה המעשית), Aḥiezer will attempt to prepare the way for the return of the Divine Presence to the Land through the carrying-out of real "actions" (מעשים) and "great enactments" (תקנות גדולות). While the failure of both characters is revealed to us at the outset of their endeavors, they are portrayed as sympathetic if tragic figures. We see this in the narrator's prefatory comments in "*ᶜAgunot*":

Lord, may Thou remember him kindly, this generous patron, for what he did with his brethren, the children of his people, who dwell before God in the land of the living, even though in the end he did not succeed! (p. 53).

The altruistic attempt by both protagonists to effect a dramatic change in the fate of the people is ultimately doomed to fail on account of a fatal flaw. Agnon, punning on the verbal root of "immigration to the Holy Land" (עלה—literally "ascent") and its idiomatic sense of success, literally "it did not ascend to his hand," or "it did not ascend to him," highlights this connection between the aspiration to settle in the Land and the falling short of the goal. Already within the tale's preface, the narrator informs us that God should remember Aḥiezer kindly, "אף-על-פי שלא עלתה לו בידו" (even though it did not work out for him) (p. 53). While in the beginning of the tale Aḥiezer has a false sense of success, "ראה הקצין שעלתה לו מחשבתו" (he perceived that his plans had worked out as planned) (p. 54), in the end, upon his departure for *Galut*, the narrator summarizes the negative outcome of his efforts as "לא עלתה לו ישיבתו, לא עלו לו תקוניו" (his settling did not work out for him, nor did his reforms) (p. 64).

What we see here within both dimensions of the critique—the interpersonal as well as the national—is a demonstration of the open-ended nature of the midrashic mode and its capacity to reinterpret the old texts in order to make them perpetually relevant. Agnon thus maintains the continuity of modern Hebrew literature with the sacred sources and their interpretation, specifically by reactivating allusions to the Song of Songs and its midrashic expansions. By doing so, he has created what Gershon Shaked has referred to as an "anti-text" to the traditional allegorical understanding of that book.[41]

[41] See Gershon Shaked, "Midrash and Narrative: Agnon's 'Agunot'," in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 285–303.

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In retrospect then, we understand Agnon's opening midrash as an allegorical antecedent for the failure of Aḥiezer's attempt to settle in the Land. There he employs its double metaphor of the Shulamite who is desperately searching for her lover, and Adam and Eve who leave the garden when the prayershawl comes unraveled. The imagery of the Song of Songs locates the setting for the encounter between the lovers in a garden; however, the Shulamite's search for the Beloved takes place in the city. In "*ᶜAgunot*," Ben Uri resides by the garden and after completing the Ark seeks solace within it. Dinah, in striking parallel to the quest of the Shulamite, goes looking for Ben Uri at his workplace but fails tragically when she stops short of the garden.

Evoking an association with the traditional marital practice of ייחוד (*yiḥud*) whereby the bride and groom share a quiet moment in isolation following the wedding ceremony, Agnon refers to the artisan's studio as "חדר מיוחד" (*ḥeder meyuḥad*). Here it is literally the "designated" or "special" room set aside by Aḥiezer for his prized workman; however, this room in which Ben Uri creates the Ark will not be a site of union. In large part due to the artist's absorption in his work, the relationship between Dinah and Ben Uri does not flourish. Instead, the artist will breathe the spirit of life into an inanimate object, but unlike God Who breathes such a spirit into His human creation in Genesis 2, Ben Uri will be depleted by the experience. The actual conjugal *ḥeder meyuḥad* into which Dinah and Yeḥezkel enter after the ceremony will also not be a place of union—their immediate inability to share intimacy portends their failure to do so throughout the short duration of their married life together. Moreover, when the groom—despondent over his loss of Fradil—goes out to wander in the fields or, alternatively, retreats to his own room to seek solitude and brood, it is said that he goes there "להתיחד" (*lehityaḥed*), "to be alone." By employing the same verbal root (יחד), Agnon exploits its full semantic range to further heighten the discrepancy between the ideal and reality. Such is the degree of the alienation between husband and wife that eventually they will pass on the street without even recognizing one another. Agnon poignantly highlights the doomed nature of this "match" in his paraphrase of the famous talmudic passage according to which the *Shekhinah* cries when a man divorces his first wife. In this case, the narrator informs us, the *Shekhinah* cried at their wedding.

It should be obvious by now that Agnon does not restrict the meaning of *ᶜagunah* to the purely technical, halakhic category of the bound wife. In his re-allegorization of the figure, he extends this condition of "living widowhood" to all mismatched, star-crossed lovers. Significantly, in this story

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there are no *ᶜagunot* in the literal halakhic sense of the term, but only figurative "abandoned souls"—souls who without their proper mates are doomed to eternal wandering. In the rabbi's final vision before he resolves to set out for *Galut*, he beholds all the levels of Heaven filled with "souls upon souls." Amongst them are "נשמות עגונות ותוהות" (***neshamot ᶜagunot ve-tohot***, Agnon's emphasis), "*bound and wandering souls*" searching for their mates and pointing them out to each other in deep sadness. The souls, despite the grammatically feminine plural (governed by the noun נשמות, *neshamot*) are genderless; that is, they include both עגונות (*ᶜagunot*) and עגונים (*ᶜagunim*). The fact that the feminine plural form of the adjective in Hebrew potentially has the force of a neutered, adverbial abstraction (as for example in the word גְלוּיוֹת, *geluyot*, "open") also serves to heighten this lack of specificity. The souls of both the male and female lovers are in a state of limbo, in a universe where the forces of gravity have been suspended. Souls float around helplessly seeking out their corresponding matches, "groping dismally in the world for their mates" (p. 64). The permeability of gender divisions within such a world is portrayed literally by Agnon's brilliant casting of Yeḥezkel as a bereaved widow:

> When he would hold forth in interpretation...the angels would accompany him, lighting his face with the light of Torah. But all of a sudden he would contract in sorrow, and at that time he resembled a woman mourning the husband of her youth who has died, and it suddenly seems to her that he is walking towards her with a pleasant expression on his face, but immediately she is reminded that he is lost, he is lost forever and will not return...(p. 62).

This blurring of the lines separating male and female—as well as the choice of the plural *ᶜAgunot* for the title—reflects the abstraction of the notion of *ᶜaginut*, of its movement from describing a specific woman to a myriad of souls. This attribution of *ᶜaginut* to an unmarked universal, rather than a gender-bound particular, allowed the author to assume as his pen-name a masculine form of this root despite its quintessentially feminine etymology.

4. Baron's "ᶜAgunah"

A very different use of the "Bound Wife" motif is made by Devorah Baron in her 1920 work "*ᶜAgunah*."[42] While she too opts for a figurative use of the notion of *ᶜaginut* and its metaphoric extension to signify Exile, she ties this condition to the internal and metaphysical exile of the Jewish

[42] Citations of the story will refer to the line number in the translation which appears above.

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woman within the traditional *shtetl* culture of Eastern Europe. The story that is told begins one cold, wet afternoon when a solitary wayfarer, the itinerant preacher—the דרשן (*darshan*)—appears on the road and makes his way into town. He proceeds to the synagogue where he delivers his sermon between the afternoon and evening prayers. Above in the balcony of the women's section is an old woman, Dinah, the wife of the town rabbinic judge. She has come to hear the recitation of the קדושה (*Kedushah*) and ברכו (*Barekhu*) prayers, which require a quorum of ten men. She stands and knits while listening to the goings-on, following the path of the sermon as it moves from one biblical figure to the next, each plaintively bearing witness to the degradation of the People of Israel and offering reassurance that their suffering will not be without end. However, when the *darshan* comes to העיקר (*ha-ᶜikar*), "the essential part" of the sermon, the משל (*mashal*) or parable, Dinah drops her knitting and becomes fully absorbed in the story. The preacher tells of a refined and gentle princess married off to a king. Her husband initially adores and pampers her and gives her many gifts—until one day he grows angry with her and suddenly leaves her. Devastated by his desertion, the former princess is disconsolate—becoming an object of pity for the neighboring women, and crying until her eyelashes fall out.

Immediately following this parable, the *darshan* proceeds apace to give the moral of the tale, the נמשל (*nimshal*), citing various biblical prooftexts whereby God's abandonment of Israel in Exile is likened to that of the woman abandoned by her husband. These verses, though, are lost on the "ignorant" Dinah who lacks the requisite knowledge of the traditional sources. She remains engrossed in the story of the princess. Thus distracted, she waits above until all have left the synagogue, and after momentarily forgetting her knitting, she returns home. There she busies herself with household chores until she lies down in bed—but she is unable to fall asleep. Still troubled by the story of the princess, she turns in the dark towards her husband's bed and asks him about the fate of the princess. The husband ignores his wife's query and does not answer. In response to his silence, Dinah complains to herself about the perennial mistreatment of women by men. As the foul odor of rotting potatoes wafts over the scene, the story concludes with Dinah turning her head back to the window through which peers the blackness of night.

5. The Interpersonal and Intertexual Relationship

The *ᶜagunah* motif was a common one for writers of the period, and given Baron's concern with the oppressed in Jewish society we would ex-

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pect that it would be treated in one of her stories—in fact, it would have been noteworthy had she not. Nevertheless, it is also clear that in this story she directly engages Agnon's tale. This link is marked most obviously by the similarity of the story titles, but also on a deeper level by the innovative and figurative use of midrashic material surrounding the theme of *ᶜaginut*. The choice of a woman named Dinah as the central female character in each of the stories also ties the two stories together—as do a variety of other more subtle interconnections.

Such an intertextual relationship between the two tales should not be altogether surprising as "*ᶜAgunot*" was well known since its appearance in 1908.[43] Furthermore, the two writers were in personal and professional contact. As was characteristic of the small group of Hebrew authors living in Palestine in the first decades of the previous century—Bakon refers to them as two *minyanim*, that is, twice the quorum of ten men required for public prayer[44]—Baron and Agnon were well acquainted with one another. While coming from different socio-economic backgrounds, their biographies share some important features: they were born less than four months apart in Eastern Europe where they both became precocious Hebrew authors; they came to Palestine within a couple of years of one another during the Second Aliyah; and after arriving they resided in their first years in the Land on the very same street in Neveh Tsedek. Moreover, Baron, as literary editor of *Ha-Poᶜel Ha-Tsaᶜir*, had professional dealings with Agnon, and during her tenure he published some of his early stories in that journal.[45]

However, beyond this connection, their relationship also had a social basis. Agnon invited Aharonovitz and Baron (to whom he refers familiarly as דבורתך, "your Devorah") to join him in his two-room apartment in Jerusalem where he had gone in the summer of 1912 to escape the heat of Tel Aviv.[46] An anecdote related by Agnon to Yosef Ḥayim Brenner attests to their close acquaintance—and the modest material circumstances of life in Palestine early in the last century. When Agnon left Palestine for Europe in 1912, he

[43] We have other possible examples of connections between the works of the two authors: Govrin, writing about "הסנדלר מז'וז'יקובקה" (The cobbler from Zhuzhikovkah) (1920), notes that it bears a marked resemblance to Agnon's "אגדת הסופר" (The legend of the scribe), whose separate and complete version was published only shortly beforehand (1919). In the other direction of possible influence, she cites the protagonist of "סבתא הניה" (Grandma Heṇyah) as a possible inspiration for Agnon's story, "תהילה" (Glory) (1950).

[44] Bakon, *מתרך החבורה* (From within the Brenner-Gnessin circle), p. 105.

[45] Among the stories first published in the pages of this journal under Baron's editorship are "תשרי" (later entitled "גבעת החול"), "והיה העקוב למישור", and "שיחות מיני עם" (includes "זבחי מתים" and "העגונה"). These stories appeared in issues dating from October 1911–July 1913.

[46] See Ḥayim Beᵓer, *גם אהבתם גם שנאתם: ביאליק, ברנר, עגנון—מערכת יחסים* (You have loved and you have hated: Bialik, Brenner, Agnon—A web of relationships) (Tel Aviv: ᶜAm ᶜOved, 1992), p. 156.

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divided his possessions among his author-friends, and he records in his letter to Brenner that "the curtain (וילון) that served to protect my clothes from dust I gave to Devorah Baron."[47] The warmth of Agnon's feelings is conveyed in his response to a letter from Tsiporah Aharonovitz, Baron's daughter, following her mother's death. She had written to him asking for copies of any correspondence from her parents he might have saved. Agnon answered that he had kept their letters, but that they had been lost in the fire that destroyed his home in Homburg in 1924. However, in the margins of the letter he adds: "Among the letters of your mother, may she rest in peace, there was preserved as well a picture of herself she had given me with a charming inscription. The words I have forgotten, but their fragrance remains."[48]

As we have seen, Agnon engages the halakhic category of *ᶜaginut* metaphorically to describe wandering souls who have failed to find their proper mates because of a focus on wealth, prestige, and social position—or alternatively, absorption in artistic creation. Additionally, the magical realism of the story may be read as an allegory for the failure of a spiritless Zionist ideology. However, by any of these readings, Agnon's use of the plural *ᶜagunot* expands the concept of *ᶜaginut* to include men as well as women. Baron's use of the singular *ᶜagunah*, on the contrary, returns it to the quotidian and perennial experience of women. Thus, while Baron also makes figurative use of the notion of *ᶜaginut*, she moves away from Agnon's symmetry of the sexes. Instead of focusing on spiritual malaise, she sees such a state of bound-ness as a literal and gendered category relevant to the description of women alone: *ᶜaginut* is not for her a Jewish national problem nor a general human condition, but one unique to women.

If we invoke Harold Bloom's concept of "the anxiety of influence,"[49] Agnon, although Baron's contemporary, represents then the (male) literary precursor with whom she must contend. In accord with the Oedipal roots of his model, Bloom cites only male examples of this dynamic in his work, but the concept can be productively extended to the case of a woman writer's

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[47] The anecdote is contained within the elegiac reflection composed by Agnon following the murder of Brenner, "Yosef Ḥayim Brenner in Life and Death," in *מעצמי אל עצמי* (From myself, to myself) (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1976), p. 129. Cited in Govrin, "המחצית הראשונה" (The first half), p. 241.
Baron and Agnon were among the twenty-four signatories to a letter of protest to the Odessa Committee that appeared in the pages of *Ha-Poᶜel Ha-Tsaᶜir* in February, 1911. The committee had threatened to cut off financial support to the journal in the wake of the Brenner Affair. See N. Govrin, *'מאורע ברנר': המאבק על חופש הביטוי, תרע"א–תרע"ג* ("The Brenner affair": The struggle for freedom of expression, 1911–1913) (Jerusalem: Ben-Tsvi, 1985), p. 56.

[48] See Beʾer, *גם אהבתם גם שנאתם* (You have loved and you have hated), p. 222.

[49] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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struggle against the arrogation by a male writer of an inherently female paradigm. For Baron, it is a struggle to reclaim the story of Dinah, of an *ᶜagunah*, not as some universal romance of mismatched souls, or as an allegory of failed settlement in the Homeland, but as a concrete tale of the oppression of a single specific woman—who in turn stands for subjugated women as a whole. The *ᶜagunah* in Baron's telling symbolizes essential female marginality, the displacement of women from sources of power and autonomy.

Alluding to the biblical character in Genesis, both Baron and Agnon employ the name Dinah for the central female character in their stories. The biblical Dinah—according to the narrative in Genesis, the only daughter born to Jacob—is known to us as a dramatic character only from the account of her rape by Shechem in Genesis 34. Following this scene, she disappears from view and is mentioned again only in the list of Israelites who descend to Egypt. As is true of many of the female protagonists in the Bible, she never speaks. In fact, like her namesakes in the stories of Agnon and Baron, she is defined by her passivity. In the biblical story she is first the object of rape and then remains invisible in the narrative as her father hears of her fate and the brothers take their revenge. In each case, it is the men who do unto her—while it is also they who do for her supposed benefit. Moreover, the midrashic etymology of the name Dinah (דינה) connects it with "the judgment" (דין, *din*) meted out to Leah her mother and by extension to the daughter as well. By this reading, Dinah's birth, coming after the birth of all of Leah's sons, marked the passing of procreatory privilege to Rachel.[50] In the midrashic tradition, Dinah is criticized by the Rabbis who extrapolate from the only action attributed to her in the biblical text: the terse and enigmatic comment in Genesis that Dinah "went out among the daughters of the land." In what constitutes a classic case of blaming the victim, the exegetes interpret this to mean that she engaged in conduct unbecoming a daughter of Israel and thus brought the act of sexual violence upon herself.[51]

Both Baron and Agnon return the name's etymology to its associations

[50] The midrash records that throughout most of Leah's pregnancy, the fetus was male, but that it was transformed into a female prior to birth. This change of gender is attributed by the Rabbis alternatively to the inappropriateness of Jacob's prayer for another son, Leah's smug assuredness that such a son would further diminish Rachel's status below even that of the maidservants, or the effectiveness of Rachel's own petitions. See *b. Ber.* 60a and *y. Ber.* 9:3

[51] The exegetes here maintain that in doing so, Dinah was following the example set by her own mother, Leah, who is also said to have "gone out" (Gen 30:16). Since in the latter instance, Leah's purpose was clearly cohabitation, the Rabbis reasoned that this too was Dinah's intent. See *Bereishit Rabbah* 80:1; *Midrash Tanḥuma*, *Vayishlaḥ* 7; etc.

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with patriarchal dominance. In Baron's story, Dinah is married to the town judge, the דיין (*dayan*), a word formed from the same root as her name. It is he who makes judgments for her and can ignore her when he so chooses. Similarly, Agnon's Dinah is subject to her father's or the rabbi's decree—marriage for the sake of the prestige attached to a Torah scholar, or alternatively, marriage for the sole purpose of producing sons. The rabbi makes explicit the requirement for women to sublimate their romantic urges and submit to their male masters: "The daughters of Israel are not permitted to follow their hearts, but rather, they must do the will of their fathers and afterwards that of their husband" (p. 60). Indeed, this lack of subjective independent status is marked by the fact that Dinah's name is mentioned only once when she is introduced to the reader two-thirds of the way through the story. Even there, it is buried between other descriptors of her identity that highlight her marginal status: "Adjacent to one of these windows stands a single solitary 'listener' (שומעת)—the old woman of seventy years, Dinah, the wife of the town judge" (ll. 123–124).

While Baron in this original version does (however reticently) provide the female protagonist a name, in her last revision of the story in 1951 she chose to leave her nameless. Also in contrast to the original where it is the husband who remains anonymous, in the later versions the *dayan* is given a name—Raphael—in a pointed and ironic allusion to the name of the archangel associated with healing. These changes reflect an attempt to reinforce the anonymity and powerlessness of the female protagonist within patriarchal society. In doing so, Baron seems to have strengthened the parallel with the well-known tendency of the biblical narrator (alluded to above) to leave female characters anonymous or silent— as in the case of Jacob and Leah's daughter. In addition, by leaving her nameless, Baron extends the universality of the story's message: she is more "everywoman" than any specific woman. Given the passage of time from its initial publication and Baron's tendency to greater restraint in her later work, this shift to anonymity could reflect, moreover, an attempt to attenuate the connection with Agnon's story. This, in turn, may have been influenced by Agnon's revisions of "*ᶜAgunot*" in which he increasingly downplayed the romantic element in the tale.

6. Inverting the Song of Songs

The pessimism of Baron's tale is part of a larger pattern of inversion of the erotic imagery of The Song of Songs. While Agnon engages the imagery of the biblical book to ironic effect in depicting unrequited love, Baron un-

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dermines its themes of human love and sensuality that are mirrored in the evocative descriptions of the fecundity of nature. The setting for "ᶜ*Agunah*" stands in stark contrast to the Palestinian spring of the Song in which "the winter (סתיו, *stav*) is past, the rain is come and gone" (2:11). Here we are transported to an Eastern European *shtetl* sunken in the dreary depths of the cold rainy season (also סתיו). Whereas the Song is characterized by an explosion of budding and reproduction that serves as the backdrop for the amorous imaginary flight of the Shulamite, and while the garden of "ᶜ*Agunot*" represents missed opportunity for the union of soul-mates, in "ᶜ*Agunah*" there is no garden whatsoever—just a bleak landscape of a few bare trees, a deserted well, mud-soaked roads, and the prayerhouse which is dark and cold despite its temporary transformation during the *darshan*'s sermon. The cramped hovel of the *dayan* and his wife contrasts with the Song's various garden-settings for the (unmarried) lovers' nocturnal trysts. The stagnant town well in Baron's story, while not dry, departs from the metaphors for vitality, incipient sexuality and excitement with which the Beloved describes the Shulamite: "A fountain of gardens, a well of living water and flowing streams from Lebanon" (4:15). Various fragrances and delicious tastes are brought forth in the imagery of the Song, while in "ᶜ*Agunah*" there is just the rank odor of mildewed potatoes and rotting graves. The Song's sonority—"the time of singing...the sound of the turtledove" (2:12)—reflected in the songs by which Agnon has Ben Uri charm Dinah—are counterposed in "ᶜ*Agunah*" to the monotonous dripping of the pail at the well, the doleful melody in which the sermon is recited, and the striking of the clock that ominously signals the time for the evening prayer. The Song delights in erotic depictions of the body and piquantly details the sexual awakening and ecstatic exaltation of the young woman. The wife of the *dayan*, in contrast, is not a post-pubescent maiden caught up in a female fantasy, nor is she a chaste and beautiful virgin of noble birth who has reached "the time of love"; rather, she is depicted as old, desiccated, and decrepit.

Indeed, the free-flowing fantasy life of the Shulamite is a sign of her independence despite the presence of the guardians of the patriarchy—in the form of the watchmen of the city and the brothers—who are responsible for protecting her virginal honor. This contrasts with both Agnon's and Baron's Dinahs who take their cue from their powerless biblical precursor. Dinah's mouth is toothless, while the Shulamite's teeth are compared to "a flock of ewes, come up from bathing, all matched and with not a one missing" (6:6). Both these Dinahs are also solitary and introverted figures, whereas the

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Shulamite has her fellow daughters of Jerusalem to whom she may rapturously disclose the Beloved's allures. While the Shulamite is very much the focus of male attention, exulting in the longing attentions of her beloved ("Let me see all the parts of your body"—2:14), and even imagining herself scantily clad and dancing provocatively before groups of onlookers (7:1–7), Baron's Dinah looks down unobserved through the window of the women's section. Moreover, with this image, Baron's reverses the directionality of the Song where, in an erotically charged scene, it is the male Beloved who is teasingly constrained to peer through the wall of the garden into which he will be invited to "taste its fruits." The *dayan*'s wife will lay the "ruins of her body" in the creaky bed—a bed, moreover, situated at some remove from that of her husband; whereas the Shulamite imagines a couch upon which she and her beloved will spend the night in intimate embrace ("All night between my breasts my love is a cluster of myrrh..." (1:13), surrounded by verdant and fragrant flora ("Wherever we lie our bed is green. Our roofbeams are cedar, our rafters fir"—2:17) and, in a stylized representation of lovemaking, imagines "His left hand under my head and his right embracing me" (2:6).

Baron also engages the Song in the context of the parable of the princess. After the princess is outfitted by her husband according to all the dictates of high fashion, he abruptly repossesses all his largesse—like the Shulamite who is stripped of her garment, her רדיד (*redid*), by the watchmen of the city. This *redid* is perhaps a shawl or some other sort of light accessory, but significantly, in the word's only other biblical occurrence—Isaiah 3:23—it is listed among the garments worn by the wanton women of Jerusalem. In Baron's story it is parallel to the phonologically similar רטונדה (*ratondeh*) which the king makes for his wife only to summarily strip her of it upon his change of heart. The pavilion King Solomon has built for his love in the Song corresponds with the covered structures (חופות, *ḥupot*) of the parable. Solomon's pavilion—along with its silver pillars and golden cushions—is also furnished with couches of purple linen that parallel the purple gowns made by the husband.

Still troubled after her return home from synagogue, yet unaware that the source of her distress is the story of the princess, Dinah cannot fall asleep. However, unlike both the sleepless Shulamite and Dinah of "*ᶜAgunot*" whose hearts are "awake" with thoughts of their true beloved, this is not the insomnia of lovesickness, but a sickness from lack of love: a lack experienced by the princess, by women in general, and by the old woman Dinah herself. Rather than a wakeful and expectant heart, her heart trembles with a

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shudder that passes through her entire body. The salty-bitter taste that first irritated her mouth during the sermon recurs now as she lies in bed refocusing on the princess's fate. This acridity contrasts with the motif of "palates sweet as wine" that characterizes both lovers in the Song (1:2, 5:16, 7:10). Here, too, the expectations surrounding the nocturnal rendezvous ("Night after night in my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth"— 3:1) stand in stark contrast to the state of alienation that exists in the relationship between the *dayan* and his wife. The playful hide-and-seek of the Song implied here in the second hemistich of this last verse—"I sought but found him not"—is by a literal but subversive reading recast to denote the *dayan*'s total non-presence. While the Shulamite lies in bed and seeks her beloved in the life of the imagination, the aged Dinah lying in her creaky bed reaches out a hand and seeks to verbally engage her husband, but is ignored. This pointed lack of interaction invokes again in a literalized sense another verse from the Song: "I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned away and was gone. I called his name, but he did not answer me" (5:6). Finally, the blackness which characterizes Baron's depiction of the life of exile—both that of the Jewish people and more particularly that of the Jewish woman—contrasts with the exotic darkness of the Shulamite's skin and the cover night will provide for her encounters with the Beloved. The view of blackness that Dinah has out her window is similarly contrasted with the Shulamite's vision of the Beloved as he approaches leaping over the mountaintops.

7. Baron's Narrative Strategies

Baron engages Agnon's story in a number of obvious and perhaps less transparent ways, while her innovative narrative techniques offer an important example of early modernist literary sensibilities. At the very outset of her brief story, Baron employs the mode of "habitual exposition" to establish the action within a framework of predictable routine. The first line of the story reads, "קרה זה על פי רוב ביום סתיו" (It would usually happen on an autumn day). While the plot is thus introduced as the recounting of a seemingly iterative occurrence, it is simultaneously the story of one specific occasion—suggesting to the reader that this particular event is typical of an oft-repeated scenario. Paradoxically, while proceeding to relate one distinct example, the narrator has undermined its uniqueness from the outset by stating, "It usually happens this way"—that what appears to be unique is in fact nothing but commonplace. This lack of dynamism and vitality is reinforced throughout the story by recurrent references to repetition and decay:

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the back and forth motions of the moss-covered pail at the well; the flapping of the teacher's coat as he trudges through the mud; Dinah's nodding head; the flickering candlelight in the synagogue; and the odor of moldy potatoes and its association with the ancestors' graves at story's end. A pervasive sense of melancholy is also conveyed by the emphasis on the cold, wet darkness of the single afternoon and evening during which the events of the tale transpire. These conditions extend even to the interiors of the houses, whose poverty is marked by the empty woodpile and the seeping of the autumn precipitation down into the cellars.[52] The focusing-in on the well at the story's beginning—in Freudian terms, metaphorically suggestive of the womb—constitutes an ironic reversal of the biblical scene at the well, the conventional venue for the betrothal type-scene. However, instead of a nubile maiden awaiting the arrival of her youthful and virile "intended" (or his delegate) as in the biblical model, here the forlorn image of the desolate well with its pail covered in moss functions as a marker for barrenness and stagnation. By extension, even the dripping of the water into the puddle could be read as analogous to images of "spilled seed"—the biblical negation of procreation and fecundity.[53]

We are still in the mode of habitual exposition when into this routinized *mise en scène* a pathetic and impoverished figure appears on the road at the outskirts of town. A *topos* in Hebrew literature of the time, this preacher-figure, the דרשן (*darshan*) or מגיד (*magid*), represents a version of marginality, but a valorized one. He is an outsider who doesn't belong to any community—and yet every community is required to provide for his needs. Moreover, while he is generally a peripheral character, he functions in roles that put him in the center of communal practices and beliefs: he brings news from other villages and, through his sermons, succor to the oppressed Jews of Eastern Europe.[54] His marginalized condition is given concrete, almost reified representation by the narrator's mention that "this man is not a carriage-riding traveler who needs well-maintained roads, but a poor

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[52] See Ziva Ben-Porat, *הסתיו בשירה העברית: על הקשרים בין מציאות, מושגים והיצגים ספרותיים וגילויהם בשירה* (Autumn in Hebrew poetry) (Tel Aviv: Misrad Ha-Bitaḥon, 1991).

[53] As in the biblical story of Judah's son Onan (Gen 38:1–11) who is put to death by God for not fulfilling his procreatory role with the widowed wife of his brother. For a discussion of the betrothal scene at the well, see Robert Alter, "Biblical Type-Scenes and the Uses of Convention," in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 47–62.

[54] The itinerant preacher was a prominent feature of Jewish life in the Russian and Polish communities. From the seventeenth century on, the town rabbi would typically deliver a sermon only twice a year, on the sabbaths preceding Passover and Yom Kippur; on all other occasions, the delivering of homilies was the function of another individual who was appointed as *magid.* See *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, s.v. "Homiletics."

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wayfarer...who proceeds on foot *by the sides of the road* (צדי דרכים, *tsidei derakhim*)" (Baron's emphasis, ll. 14–16) in order to traverse the flooded lanes. His ambiguous status is further highlighted by a term that rhymes rhythmically and phonetically with this ambulatory technique of walking along the shoulders of the road—he is defined as a "מגיד מישרים" (*magid meisharim)*, a teller of truths, literally a "straight talker," a term which will in retrospect ironically underscore his parabolic digressive style.[55] And yet as he makes his way into the village, he is treated generously and with respect by the shopkeeper, while the schoolteacher dismisses his pupils early so that he may make it to the synagogue for the *darshan*'s homily that will be "like cool water upon a tired soul." The entire verse to which this passage alludes in Prov 25:25 reads, "Like cool water to a parched throat is good news from a distant land"—which highlights the *darshan*'s role as bearer of good news from afar.

Before the *darshan* begins to speak, the synagogue is transformed by the lighting of a special kerosene lamp. The glow from this lamp causes the windows to darken all at once, thereby blocking out the blackness of the outside world. At the same time, it negates the light of the memorial candle, a marker for mourning, while its light reaches up above the ark to illuminate the letters of the *shiviti*, which now stands "bright, as if washed" in the fullness of its letters. The purpose of this sign, typically placed in a place of prayer and containing the words from Ps 16:8—"I always set (שויתי) the LORD before me"—is to focus the worshipper's concentration; here, its brightening represents the hope in God's omnipresence and perpetual concern for His people. As the *darshan* begins his sermon, the content of his words is not initially presented to us; only the empathic effect of the melody of the preacher's homily is conveyed. While spoken in hoarse and unsure tones, his words are "near and touching, O, how heart-touching" (ll. 54–55). The actual schematic presentation of the sermon's progression recounts the *darshan*'s summoning of the forefathers to attest to the misery of the Jewish people abandoned by their God. Beginning with supplications for personal and national salvation that David addresses to God in Psalms, the preacher invokes the depths of the national despair by citing lines from the eulogy over the loss of Jewish autarchy from the book of Lamentations: "We are

[55] The term *magid* itself is an abbreviated form of the expression *magid meisharim* which appears in Isa 45:19: "I did not speak in secret, at a site in a land of darkness; I did not say to the stock of Jacob, 'Seek Me out in a wasteland'—I am the LORD, who foretells reliably, who announces what is true" (דובר צדק מגיד מישרים). In the kabbalistic literature, the word *magid* connotes a heavenly agent (a voice, angel, or spirit) that communicates supernatural illumination to the mystic.

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hotly pursued; exhausted, we are given no rest" and "All our enemies loudly rail against us" (5:5; 3:46).

At this point, the *darshan*, in the throes of his impassioned delivery, pauses to wipe perspiration from his forehead and the tears from about his eyes. On cue, his listeners automatically translate the abstraction of Israel's immemorial suffering into scenes from their own abject reality. In their mind's eye they see "the face of the fat-chinned and murder-drenched *oryadnik*, the town gendarme; the abuse of the inspection-clerk during his inspections within the shops; the drunken joy of the gentiles and the terrors of the pogroms on their holidays, the market days" (ll. 73–76). The *darshan* segues into the messages of consolation from Jeremiah and Isaiah—"Not forever will God abandon us, will the Holy One of Israel forsake us," and "Do not fear, O Jacob; and do not be terrified, O Israel for I am with you." These words of comfort cause the darkness outside to seemingly brighten. The preacher calls forth the greatest heroes of the ancient and glorious Jewish past—Abraham, Moses, and David—to plead Israel's case before God. His escalating fervor in doing so leads us to understand that he is giving a specific sermon related to a specific occasion. However, the narrator subsequently notes—in the present continuous tense—that, "if the need arises," the matriarch Rachel may also be summoned. It thus becomes clear that the preacher's words are but a stock sermon in which Rachel, like the princess of the parable, is a figure that may be called upon at will as a witness for the defense. This linguistic shift from a specific mode of exposition to the habitual—in the direction opposite to that of the story's beginning—undermines the specificity of this sermon as being limited to a particular time and occasion. Read backwards then, the various "appearances" of Israel's illustrious ancestors are seen as hackneyed and their efforts futile.

In the *darshan*'s parable, Rachel's distress at the sight of her children's sufferings in exile alludes to Jer 31:15:

> A cry is heard in Ramah
> —wailing, bitter weeping—
> Rachel weeping for her children.
> She refuses to be comforted
> For her children, who are gone.

The midrash interpreting this verse explains that Rachel was buried by Jacob on the road to Ephrat (Gen 35:19)—and not in the ancestral tomb in the Cave of Machpelah—"because Jacob foresaw that [his descendants] who were to be exiled [by Nebuchadnezzar] would pass by way of Ephrat. Therefore, he buried her there so that she might seek mercy for them. Referring to

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this, the Bible says, 'A cry is heard in Ramah...'" (*Bereishit Rabbah* 82:10). Within the valorized depiction of Rachel in Baron's story, such is the power of the matriarch's pleas that they lead to a startling, all-but-blasphemous reversal. It is God Himself who, "as it were," ends up off in the corner like a young boy, crying over Israel's fate in Exile. The image here of Rachel—"Wrapped in light and enveloped in mourning"—also contains an allusion to Psalm 104, which describes the magisterial creative power of God: "[You] are wrapped in a robe of light, spreading out the heavens like a tent cloth." This is the very passage that men recite as a meditation upon putting on the *ṭalit* in the morning, an act that women traditionally do not perform.

The shift here in the second hemistich of the verse mirrors the funerary textile imagery of the burial shroud that covers the desecrated Ark in Agnon's story. (Here too, as in the case of Ben Uri's personified and feminized Ark, there is an appropriation of God's glory and power by the female figure as she lodges her protests.) This textile imagery is continued in the *darshan*'s parable in the form of the *rotandeh* that the husband makes for the princess. In turn, both these images may be compared with the image of the *ṭalit* contained in Agnon's pseudo-midrashic preamble. In Baron's story, the *ṭalit* is solely assigned to the masculine domain and "envelops" the sermon at its beginning and end: before the *magid*'s talk, the congregational prayershawl is spread over the altar, while the preacher's *ṭalit* becomes a focus of attention as he concludes.[56] In a sense, then, Baron juxtaposes the central image from "*ᶜAgunot*" of the *ṭalit* (from the male domain, but grammatically feminine) with the *rotandeh* (an article of women's attire, but grammatically masculine) which cloaks the abandoned wife. An additional connection between the two stories is the way in which torn or unraveled fabric functions as a sign of mourning and a marker for the unredeemed state of exile. Exercising her merciful and maternal prerogative, Rachel "tears the heavens" with her complaint. Read in the context of the allusion to the grand cosmogonical account of Psalm 104, this constitutes an undoing of the divine work of Creation. It also brings to mind the attempt by Sadness to tear the *ḥupah* covering from above the heads of Dinah and Yeḥezkel in "*ᶜAgunot*."

This mention of the female biblical figure is, significantly, the lead-in to

[56] On the textile motif in Rabbinic tradition and its implications for cultural constructions of gender, see Miriam Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies: Rabbis, Gender, and History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

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"עיקר הדבר", "the essence of the matter," the *mashal*:

> A parable is told about a young and delicate princess who was married off to a king. And her husband cherished her, making for her lovely canopies (חופות) and purple gowns and giving her precious gems and pearls, and he didn't remove himself from her until he made for her a kind of gown of gold, which is called by the ladies a *ratondeh*.... Some time later, the king grew angry with her and proceeded to overturn on her the canopies, took her jewelry and her clothes from her, and he left her and went overseas.
>
> And the neighborwomen would gather around her, shaking and nodding their heads at her as if to say: "Woe to her, to this wretched one—look at what her husband has done to her." As for her, she sits desolate with disheveled hair, mourning at night and crying over what has befallen her, **crying until her eyelashes fall out**... (Baron's emphasis, ll. 101–112).

Within this passage are some remarkable examples of literary artistry. Although the situation of the princess is seemingly one of *ᶜaginut*, no explicit reference is made here to the abandoned woman as an *ᶜagunah*. It is, however, subtly intimated in her initial description as ענוגה (*ᶜanugah*), "delicate"—a word rhyming with *ᶜagunah* and consisting of the same triconsonantal root transformed only by the metathesis of the second and third radicals. While it is the princess who is described in this passage as delicate, the implication is that it is her situation which is delicate—and precarious. Her status as an object to be acted upon is conveyed as well by the passive voice of the verb ניסאה (*nisᵓah*), "to be married off." It is only when the reader is exposed to Dinah's perspective and the parable is filtered through her consciousness that the narrator invokes the specific term referring to the abandoned wife. (Subsequently, the use of the word *ᶜagunah* is returned to only once more at story's end when Dinah lying sleepless in bed applies that label to the princess.) Furthermore, in the phrase "לא זז ממנה עד ש...", Baron reactivates a fixed idiomatic expression by exploiting its ambiguity. The phrase could be read "The king didn't cease from" showering her with gifts, or, "The king didn't take his leave from her until...."[57] Through the defamiliarization of this phrase, Baron foreshadows the king's eventual desertion of the princess, while simultaneously highlighting the connection of her abandonment with her pampered status as the temporarily adored wife. The use of the word חופות (*ḥupot*, "canopies") also immediately suggests the bridal canopy, its primary meaning and a traditional metonym for the

[57] The first reading exploits the idiomatic usage of the verb to mean "does not cease to, persists in." In the revisions of the story, and against the general trend in her work towards greater sublimation, Baron changes this to "לא עזב אותה עד..." (He didn't leave her until...).

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wedding ceremony and the institution of marriage itself. Within the parable, *ḥupot* are the first item listed of those the husband makes for her; his subsequent overturning of them thereby symbolically marks his forsaking her.[58]

The silence that prevails in the men's section at the conclusion of the *mashal*—literally, "a bating of breath" (עצירת נשימה, *ᶜatsirat neshimah*)—marks the freezing of the action by the narrator. It is this lull in the plot that is the occasion for a shift in point of view, a pan shot to "the old woman of seventy years, Dinah, the wife of the town judge" (ll. 123–124). She sits alone in the women's section above, in darkness save for the few, oblique rays of light that penetrate through the windows of the women's balcony. This dual perspective in which two vantage points or versions are presented—one "canonical" and the other suppressed, one masculine and the other feminine—is a strategy evidenced in other Baron stories, perhaps most notably in her story "בראשית" (In the beginning) with its parallel to the two versions of the creation story in Genesis.[59] Such a form of contrapuntal exposition has a concrete anchor in her own childhood, for which we have the testimony of a childhood friend:

> I remember that as a boy I would study in the old studyhouse next to Devorah's older brother, Binyamin, under the supervision of her father, Rabbi Shabetai Baron, the town rabbi. Devorah would sit alone, imprisoned in the women's balcony, studying aloud *ᶜEin Yaᶜakov* or midrash. From time to time, she would call out through the opening, "Dad!" or "Binyamin!"—"What does this mean?" I can't deny that on the inside I resented her perseverance; even so, I couldn't help admiring her.[60]

Dinah is introduced to us as "a listener" (שומעת, *shomaᶜat*), thus high-

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[58] Even-Shosan in המילון העברי המרוכז (The condensed Hebrew dictionary) lists four meanings for this word, derived from the root ḥ-p-h (whose base verbal meaning is "to cover, serve as shelter or protection"): "1) the sheet stretched upon four poles under which the wedding ceremony is performed; 2) the tent or room in which the bride and groom would isolate themselves during the seven days of the wedding feast (see Isa 4:5; Ps 19:6; Joel 2:16); 3) [figuratively] wedding, marriage; 4) a canopy over a chair or bed."

[59] D. Baron, סיפורים (Stories). (Tel-Aviv: Davar, 1927), pp. 6–20 and פרשיות (Tales), pp. 225–235. An English translation may be found in N. Seidman and C. Kronfeld, eds. *The First Day*, pp. 3–15.

[60] Moshe Gitlin, "בנעוריה: מזכרונות בן-עיר" (In her youth: From the memories of a boy from the hometown), in אגב אורחא, ed. Ts. Aharonovits, p. 208. Note here his use of the word "imprisoned" (כלואה) to describe Baron's position in the women's balcony. The עין יעקב (*ᶜEin Yaᶜakov*) is a comprehensive collection of the aggadic sections of the Talmud Bavli—and some from the Talmud Yerushalmi, with relevant commentaries, begun by Yaᶜakov ben Shelomoh ibn Ḥaviv (c. 1450–1516, Spanish talmudist; following the Expulsion, settled in Salonika) and completed by his son, Levi ibn Ḥaviv (c. 1484–1545, settled in Jerusalem in 1525 and became chief rabbi). The work was published for the first time in its entirety in Salonika in 1516 and enjoyed a wide appeal, having been reprinted over a hundred times. See *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, s.v. "ibn Ḥaviv" and the article by Marjorie Lehman, "The *ᶜEin Yaᶜakov*: A Collection of Aggadah in Transition," *Prooftexts* 19 (1999): 21–40.

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lighting her passivity. She is also defined in relation to her husband as "אשת הדיין" (*eshet ha-dayan*, the wife of the *dayan*), an explicit representative of patriarchal authority, while her name, derived from the same verbal root, signifies her resigned acceptance of "her fate"—דינה. Excluded from learning the traditions of the male members of the community, the passages cited by the preacher are thus inaccessible to her, "like the dry pieces of bread in her husband's house" to her toothless mouth. Indeed, her overall powerlessness is symbolized by her lack of teeth (while this phrase also makes explicit her lack of any claim to ownership of the house). "But no matter," the narrator informs us with heavy irony, "The sock with the hank of yarn is with her here in her hands, and so in the meantime she stands and knits"—a routine and prototypically female activity that she is able to perform while keeping her eyes focused directly on the *darshan*'s mouth.

With the shift in point of view we are transported by the narrator back to the beginning of the sermon and are thus able to observe the progression and impact of the *magid*'s words upon the old woman. She continues to knit automatically, all the while listening to his sermon. It is only when the *darshan* relates his parable—the story of the abandoned princess—that her knitting falls to the floor. This dropping of the knitting materials (rendered in the passive, without any agency on the part of Dinah) signifies her total engrossment in the tale and her identification with the princess's situation: "The fate of the desolate *ᶜagunah* pierces and descends to the heart's depths" (ll. 141–142). Like the women of the parable who shake their heads in sympathy over the deserted princess, Dinah focuses on the suffering of the abandoned wife, commiserating with her to such a degree that she can even taste in her mouth the bitter salty tears of the *ᶜagunah*:

> Poor, tempestuous, unpitied—woe to her and woe to her life, woe to her and woe to her life—she shakes her gray head back and forth, back and forth. A salty-bitter taste irritated her palate, a kind of **reflection** of the tears of the abandoned princess who sits and cries in the stillness of the night, and her two eyes—all the eternal and universal sorrow of the unfortunate **and justice-deprived** woman peers now from their pupils. (Baron's emphasis, ll. 143–148).

We follow the thought patterns of Dinah, who hears the prooftexts without understanding them, but is bound in complete empathy with the princess. Baron exploits here the double-meaning of the word עולמי (*ᶜolami*) as a temporal and spatial descriptor to have Dinah see in the eyes of the princess all oppressed women throughout time and throughout the world. The men listen to the parable to understand the moral of this story, but for her the parable

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has no utility beyond its own internal moral.

This split point of view continues through to the end of the story. Returning to the men, there is no clear closure to the parable—it is summarily concluded as the *magid* "swims onward, onward," leaving the princess behind in order to provide the moral of the parable—the *nimshal*—along with its supporting Scriptural citations. The *nimshal* is thus an expected part of the sequence; one senses the relief of the *darshan* and the male audience as they return to a 'more comfortable' consideration of the sufferings of Israel in Exile and the hoped-for redemption cited from the Book of Isaiah (50:1, 54:6, 54:7):

> "Thus said the LORD: Where is the bill of divorce of your mother whom I dismissed?"
>
> "The LORD has called you back as a wife forlorn and forsaken. Can one cast off the wife of his youth?"
>
> "For a while I forsook you, but with vast love I will bring you back."

These verses of putative consolation, in which the rejected wife (Israel) is restored to her former position by her forgiving husband (God), extend the lifting of the darkness (of the outside and of Exile)—at least until the conclusion of the services.

Continuing the metaphor of swimming (and its associations with being adrift in a wide and dangerous ocean), the *darshan* seeks to resolve the tension raised by the *mashal* by getting to the safety of landfall: "Once more the same somber melody, soft and somewhat hoarse, but now one senses within it a trace of weariness and an intent to loosen the knots and stroke to reach the shore" (ll. 157–159). While this homiletic exercise has had a consoling and uplifting effect on the men, it does not have such a salutary impact upon Dinah, to whom the *nimshal* and its prooftexts are unintelligible. Through the story, she has come to intuit the precariousness of the feminine condition, while the externalization of her viewpoint allows the reader to observe this growing awareness. Here Baron daringly privileges the *mashal*, which is traditionally secondary, while concomitantly de-emphasizing the *nimshal*. In other words, the story is what is important, not its message; or, to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, the story is the message.[61] By focusing on the *mashal* itself, Baron has turned the traditional hierarchy of the parable and its moral on its head. As the Hebrew idiom goes: אין המשל דומה לנמשל (*ein ha-mashal*

[61] Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message* (New York: Random House, 1967).

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domeh la-nimshal)—literally, "the parable does not resemble the moral." In addition to undermining the traditional hierarchy in which the parable is subordinate to its moral, Baron has negated any unity of meaning between these two constitutive elements of the *mashal-nimshal* sequence. In essence, she brings the parable to the center—much as she would like to do for the role of women vis-à-vis men—which is furthermore suggested by the reversal of roles between the Matriarch Rachel and God that immediately precedes the parable.

Baron's use of biblical allusions in the *nimshal* also reflects an innovative and subversive approach. If we read the citations from the Prophets in their original context, it is clear that they are spoken in condemnation of Israel's oppression of its own marginalized groups. This is opposed to the *darshan*'s sole emphasis on the consequences received by Israel for their transgression, according to which the oppressed state of the Jewish people is God's punishment for social injustice. The verses cited within the sermon come primarily from the Book of Isaiah, where the prophet—or God—rails against the people's corruption of social justice, singling out for rebuke the plight of the unprotected: the orphan, the widow, and, one could argue by extension, the *ᶜagunah*. The preacher's words—"Exile is bitter indeed and difficult, but—temporary, as a booth in a vegetable garden—'like a hut in a cucumber field'"—allude to Isa 1:8. The full verse there (to which the subordinate clause of the second half of the *darshan*'s sentence alludes) is: "The daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a hut in a cucumber field, like a city beleaguered." The emphasis in its original context is thus not on the temporary nature of the desolation—as in its invocation by the *darshan*, but on its near total effect. God will not heed the pleas or sacrifices of a people whom the prophet likens to Sodom and Gomorrah until they "wash themselves clean" of iniquity. The conclusion of this section in Isaiah reads: "Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged, uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow" (Isa 1:8–17). This placement of the source material in a new context reactivates the prophetic message—a technique also found in classical midrash.

The clock striking seven snaps the men out of their reverie—time for the evening prayer—and they cue the *darshan* through a series of increasingly insistent coughs that they are eager for him to finish so that they may be done with their devotional obligations. The *darshan* complies, and gathering the edges of his prayershawl he fiercely "whips the verses" in a sprint to the finish. The hasty and awkward descent he makes from the speaker's platform is likened to the descent from a mountain in terms that parody the law-

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giver Moses coming down from Sinai. His final remark, a petition of messianic hope with which a *magid* would typically conclude his sermon—"May a redeemer come to Zion, speedily and in our days"—also contains the first line of the evening prayer service. The *darshan* moves his lectern aside and removes and folds his prayershawl, his role thus concluded for the evening.

From the beginning of Baron's story the ambiguous status of the *darshan* is highlighted by two sets of rhyming terms. We have already discussed the periphery/center dichotomy as represented by the pair מגיד מישרים/צדי דרכים (*magid meisharim/tsidei derakhim*, teller of truths/sides of the roads). To this we can now add the reference to him as an "out-of-towner" (literally, "a foreign Jew"—היהודי הזר, *ha-yehudi ha-zar*) from the perspective of the storeowner from whom he purchases snuff-tobacco, while subsequently in the synagogue he is designated "a dear man" (literally, "the dear Jew"—היהודי היקר, *ha-yehudi ha-yakar*) when described through Dinah's eyes. We can also see how the peripheral existence of the *darshan* within society parallels Dinah's marginal condition. They are both impoverished—he, subject to the good will of the communities amongst whom he wanders, while she being property-less, is subject to the whim of her husband. During the sermon, both Dinah and the *magid* are standing. Her eyes remain fixed on his mouth even as she knits, establishing a connection of which the *darshan* is unaware. Moreover, both figures are valued only for their utility; once the *darshan* has dispensed his news of the neighboring communities and has delivered his message of consolation, he is of no further use to his hosts; when the time for evening prayer has arrived, his audience impatiently signals him to conclude. His taking off and folding his prayershawl correlates with Dinah's gathering and folding her knitting yarn, as well as with her later exchanging of her headscarf with the faded flower for a worn kerchief. After the conclusion of prayers, they are the last two to leave the synagogue. However, Dinah—an old, barren woman—lacks even his temporary valorized status: she is goes unnoticed standing in the women's balcony and is later ignored by her own husband.

At the conclusion of the service, and with the first opening of the synagogue door, "the moisture from outside bursts in and slaps their faces with all that it contains of the diseases of the infirm" (ll. 172–174). As the men in the prayerhouse depart, Dinah remains alone in the women's balcony watching them exit, her discomfort palpable even though its source is still undefined: "Something perturbs her and afflicts her soul, this much is clear" (l. 190). When she finally descends to leave after the departure of the *magid*,

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she leaves her knitting behind in her distraction. This "disremembering," accompanied as it is by the ensuing narratorial comment that "at long last she forgot and left them" (ll. 193–194), emphasizes the appearance of incipient fissures in the blocked awareness of her oppressed state. Retrieving her knitting with a sigh that connotes resignation to her role, she returns to the house and busies herself with household duties in an attempt to alleviate her inner turmoil. The small space between the stove and the table where she prepares dinner and washes the dishes highlights the sense of stricture. Like the שמש (*shamash*), the synagogue beadle, who arranges all the stands after the end of services and the departure of the men, Dinah places all the utensils in a single row. However, her turning them over so that their openings—literally "their mouths"—are facedown emphasizes the obsessive quality of this attempt to forestall her anxiety—as it were, a silencing of the voices. This focus on the knitting and the housework reiterates the themes of stagnation and barren repetition that we have noted throughout the story, but this time they are associated with activities women routinely perform day after day.

As Dinah lays "the ruins of her body" into the creaking bed, a severe chill penetrates the cracks in the house, and she notes the stench of moldy potatoes. Mention of the rotting vegetables returns the reader to the story's beginning and the rain-soaked potatoes stored in the basements. This time, however, the narrator associates it with the odor that rises from the graves of the ancestors. Turning to face the wall, through the window Dinah sees the blackness of night, and is thereby reminded of the preacher's comparing it to the blackness of Exile. She begins to drift off to sleep "as if ready to sink in slumber" (ll. 210–211), but her memory of the preacher's simile causes her to associate the sorrowful situation of the Jewish people with the predicament of the princess. A shudder passes through her heart and body as it becomes clear to her what it was that had saddened her in the prayerhouse—the fate of the princess. She turns over towards her husband's bed. She reaches out a hand—not to her husband, but "to the air." In the first and only words she speaks aloud in the story, Dinah with tremulous voice asks anxiously about the preacher's words: "**You** must have fathomed the depth of his words, there, in the prayerhouse—what happened in the end to **that one**...to the *ᶜagunah*? Did he return to her afterwards...the husband? Did he return...?" (Baron's emphasis, ll. 218–222). Although, the husband does not answer her, Baron stresses here in bold type that he is not actually asleep. Moreover, his refusal to respond now as well as on into the future is conveyed emphatically by the use of the cognate accusative form in the imper-

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fect tense (ענה לא יענה, *ᶜanoh loᵓ yaᶜaneh*). Indeed, although the *mashal* is considered the "essential part" of the sermon, the general lack of attention to the literal plight of women is underscored by the fact that there had been no resolution of the princess's plight. Befitting her status as an *ᶜagunah*, she was left in limbo by the male speaker and his audience, as if all that was important was her allegorical utility in depicting the suffering of the Jewish communities in Diaspora.

The unease elicited within Dinah by the tale of the specific woman now prompts her only other utterance in the story, albeit unvoiced—a blanket condemnation of men's treatment of women throughout history: "Such is **their way** from time immemorial" (Baron's emphasis, l. 225). She, like the women of the parable, shakes her head "as it were" over the wondrous princess, and identifies men as the source of women's perennial misfortune. It is only her outright humiliation by her husband's stony silence that finally leads Dinah to articulate to herself a recognition of her own oppression: the judgment or sentence implied etiologically in her name as well as in her husband's title. Like the protagonists of Agnon's story, Dinah is not literally an *ᶜagunah*, and even though her husband has not physically deserted her, in her existential state she is as much an abandoned wife as the princess of the parable. Although the *dayan* is present in the bed nearby, his emotional absence defines Dinah's status as a "living widow." The story ends with the repeated description of the bitter cold and the stench of rotting potatoes. Again the odor is compared to that emanating from the moldering graves, but this time with a change to the future tense: "Like that which will spread on autumn mornings over the ancestors' graves outside the town" (ll. 229–230), signaling the inevitable continuity of Woman's internal exile. Her husband's silence finally moves Dinah to condemn man's treatment of women. Turning her back to him, once again she looks through her window out on the blackness of the night—the blackness of women's inner exile within that of the Jewish people. The repetition of the word "black"—"and the night which peers through the window from outside is black, O, how black" (ll. 230–231)—that sounds the final note of the story, is a concrete syntactical signification of this double exile.[62]

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[62] Here I offer an alternative interpretation to that of Nurit Govrin when she writes about "*ᶜAgunah*": "The complaint about the eternal fate of women is repeatedly heard in this story, but it is not only softened and refined, but steeped in humor due to the indirect means of writing and the character of the hero who has been selected to represent her" ("המחצית הראשונה" [The first half], p. 296).

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8. Reading Against Agnon

The absorption of Dinah in the parable of the princess marks her growing consciousness of the plight of women's powerlessness, while the focus on repetition and stagnation throughout the story serves to correlate plot structure with the theme of the chronic and ubiquitous oppression of women. As the parable makes clear, even a rich, young, and pampered woman is in a precarious state of dependence. She is subject to the whims of her husband who capriciously grows angry with her and leaves her. Both Dinah and the princess are *ᶜagunot*—but not simply the plural *ᶜAgunot* of Agnon's title, referring to a general human condition; rather, their *ᶜaginut* is a bond of common oppression which unites the two women, transcending differences of age, class, place and time. In fact, although the female characters in the two stories share the same name, Agnon's Dinah has her analogue in Baron's story in the princess of the *mashal*—the privileged daughter of noble birth. Baron utilizes this parable to show the "false consciousness" as to the true nature of women's oppressed state of one who has been placed on a pedestal. Baron, as one educated in the traditional sources, one for whom the Scriptural passages are not closed off, can use these texts to mediate these differences between women and show the connections that bind their common fate. Through her use of allusion, the reversal of the hierarchical relationship between parable and moral, and the presentation of alternative viewpoints, she has anticipated many later modernist tendencies.

Baron, like Agnon, is also interested in moving away from the traditional allegorical interpretation of the relationship of God and Israel as estranged husband and wife, but Baron seeks an alternative to Agnon's abstraction and generalization of the condition of *ᶜaginut*. For Agnon, the exile depicted in his allegory is a metaphysical exile: social constraints prevent the proper matches and this creates a state of emotional estrangement. This phenomenon allows for no differentiation between male and female experience. While Baron is sensitive and sympathetic to the dismal existence of the Jewish people in *Galut* and highlights their abject condition, she seeks to point up the further internal exile of Jewish women. *ᶜAginut* and Exile in Baron's story have nothing to do with romantic notions of potential mates wandering in search of each other; instead, these conditions are inscribed in the social position of women. *ᶜAginut* for Baron is a binding to a restrictive, patriarchal order—as opposed to Agnon's notion of *ᶜaginut* as a metaphor for the limbo of wandering, mate-less spirits. Russell Ferguson has commented on the necessity of distinguishing between marginalization by choice

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and that imposed by social forces:

> The tradition of the avant-garde has led many artists to identify with a kind of glamorized otherness; to see themselves as marginalized, and art by definition as a marginalized activity.... This tradition inevitably creates an ambiguous relationship with those who have not chosen marginalization, but have had it thrust upon them. It is all too easy for a white, male artist to buy into the long-established myth of the outsider and, in the process, forget that his race and sex still confer on him privileges which are none the less real for having been forgotten.[63]

In Agnon's story, the specificity of female marginality is denied in the name of universal human exile. The metatextual move made in Baron's story can thus be seen as a response to Agnon's reading of midrash that renders us all potentially marginal.

9. Between Center and Margin

While in some ways the reception of Baron was typical of the experience of women authors world-over and throughout time, there is much unique to her circumstances and those of the revival of Hebrew literature. By the age of sixteen, Devorah Baron had already elicited enthusiastic reactions from readers and critics alike when she began to publish her stories in the Hebrew periodicals of the day. Ada Pagis has discussed some of the extra-literary factors behind this acclaim.[64] Perhaps the most significant of these elements was the nationalist linguistic agenda. The leaders of the Hebrew language revival celebrated Baron as a female paragon of the new Hebrew writer. Beyond her utility as a national symbol, it did not in any way diminish her acclaim that she was a young and attractive woman—critics referred to her "deep-set eyes" and her "majestic height." Pagis speaks of Baron's early reception as "something of a phenomenon: a woman, a Hebrew woman writer, an editor—and pretty [!]"[65] And yet it is this early infatuation of readers with her "lyrical charm" that was partially responsible for fixing her position as a "niche writer." She became known not for any specific literary talents, but primarily as a "woman writer" (אישה סופרת, *ishah soferet*), or, as a "*shtetl* author" (סופרת העיירה, *soferet ha-ᶜayyarah*). Of course, her reclusiveness in

[63] Russell Ferguson, *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (New York: MIT Press, 1990), p. 111.

[64] See Ada Pagis, "יצירתה של דבורה בארון בעיני הביקורת" (Devorah Baron's oeuvre in the eyes of literary criticism), in *דבורה בארון: מבחר מאמרי ביקורת על יצירתה* (Devorah Baron: A selection of articles on her work) (Tel Aviv: ᶜAm ᶜOved, 1974), pp. 7–22.

[65] A. Pagis, "יצירתה של דבורה," pp. 8–9.-One could add "rabbi's daughter" (בת הרב) to the list of epithets she often elicited.

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the second half of her life only added to the fascination with her—a mystique that she may have consciously or unconsciously cultivated. However, by placing her on a pedestal for extra-literary reasons, readers and critics alike displayed an implicit condescension towards women as serious artists. Although some early critics like Brenner and Lakhover focused their analyses on specifically literary talents, others viewed her in celebratory terms as a representative of the ideal of the new Jewish womanhood, with the result that her work was often treated superficially. This tendency was reinforced by the impressionistic nature of much of Hebrew literary criticism until the 1960s.

Another factor in the devaluing of Baron's oeuvre was the situating of most of her stories in the Eastern European *shtetl*. In contrast to Mendele, the "grandfather" of modern Hebrew literature, her depiction of the *shtetl* was not derisive. She was writing about this existence at the very time of its disintegration, and she awakened conflicting emotions in her readers. On the one hand, she touched upon a sense of homesickness, especially in the context of the harsh realities of life in Palestine during the early decades of the twentieth century. This was combined with the immigrants' raw sense of guilt over what they had left behind, both their families and the traditional way of life. Especially after the Holocaust, her works came to be seen as a commemoration of the destroyed communities of Europe. Although women in particular identified with her depictions of the oppressed female condition, for the most part the attention that she received on the basis of nostalgia not only rendered invisible the social critique implicit in her stories, but took away from an appreciation for the intrinsic literary value of her work. Moreover, even this wistfulness was conditioned and ultimately dominated by the distaste of the Zionist project for the exilic Jewish existence, seen as representing all that is primitive and debased in Jewish culture from long centuries of passive submission to oppression. Additionally, the memoir form itself, which characterized many of her stories, was perceived as a sub-canonical genre. Many readers and critics saw her stories merely as documentary texts devoid of literary artifice and this contributed to the reductionist tendency to ignore Baron's craft.

Beginning in the fifties, and especially in the sixties, there was a change in the tone of criticism that was not only connected to the author's death. No longer did those writing critiques know Baron personally; moreover, other women writers of stature had appeared so she did not have to shoulder the burden of being *the* iconic Hebrew woman writer. This was coupled with a shift in Hebrew literary criticism from impressionistic appreciations of

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works to a more theoretical approach. Most important was the launching of the modernist search for alternative literary models—the byways laid out by literary grandfathers and uncles...as well as mothers, sisters, and aunts. Among the critics to refocus attention on Baron at this time was Dan Miron.[66] Then, in 1974, Ada Pagis, helping to rehabilitate Baron (as her husband Dan Pagis had done for another marginal figure, David Fogel), edited and published a collection of critical essays on Devorah Baron and her work.[67] In 1988 there appeared *קובץ דבורה בארון* (Devorah Baron: Miscellany), which included Nurit Govrin's study of the author, "המחצית הראשונה: דבורה בארון—חייה ויצירתה, תרמ"ח–תרפ"ג" (The first half: Devorah Baron—Her life and work, 1887–1923), as well as all of her early stories, the large majority of which were not reissued in her volumes of collected stories. Lily Rattok gives Baron prominent attention in her recent anthology of women writers, including two of her stories, while speaking of Baron as representing "the first birth" of Hebrew literature written by women.[68] Perhaps most emblematic of the attempt to reclaim Baron as an Israeli cultural icon was the publishing by the psychologist Amia Lieblich of *רקמות: שיחותיי עם דבורה בארון, תש"ן* (Embroiderings—My conversations with Devorah Baron, 1990) (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1991). This work consists of a series of fictional visits to the reclusive writer's home before her death.[69] Most recently, one of Israel's leading theater companies, the Cameri Theater in Tel Aviv, has staged Yehudit Katzir's play called simply "דבורה בארון" (Devorah Baron), which again is a fictional recreation, this time of the interactions between Baron and her daughter during the period of her seclusion.[70]

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66 Dan Miron, "עולמה הפיוטי של דבורה בארון" (The lyric world of Devorah Baron) in *כיוון אורות: תחנות בסיפורת העברית המודרנית* (Back to focus: Studies in modern Hebrew fiction) (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1979), pp. 378–391.

67 Pagis, *Devorah Baron.*

68 Lily Rattok, *הקול האחר: סיפורת נשים עברית* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibuts Ha-Me'uḥad, 1994), pp. 274–287. Rattok dates this first beginning of women's literature in Hebrew to 1902, the year in which the fifteen-year-old Baron's first stories began to appear, while the writing of Amalia Kahana-Carmon represents for Rattok the "second birth." Esther Fuchs has described how Baron's works served as a model for Kahana-Carmon's depiction of the victimization of women by patriarchal arrangements (Esther Fuchs, *Israeli Mythogynies: Women in Contemporary Hebrew Fiction* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987], pp. 89–89).

69 This work has also appeared in an English translation by Naomi Seidman in *Conversations with Dvora: An Experimental Biography of the First Modern Hebrew Woman Writer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Seidman and Chana Kronfeld have also most recently published a collection of English translations of Baron's stories, titled, *"The First Day" and Other Stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

70 Indicative of Baron's continued iconic status is the fact that even in Yonatan Gefen's popular memoir about his mother's life—*אישה יקרה* (Precious woman) (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1999)—he invokes Baron as a figure who, like his mother, was tragically caught in the web of ideological commitments at the cost of her mental health.

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Devorah Baron's reception from the outset has thus been a complicated one. While she has consistently been perceived as having a central role in modern Hebrew literature, it has not always been due to an appreciation of the aesthetic value of her work. Extra-literary factors have played a large part in maintaining her ambiguous status as a marginalized figure at the center. On the one hand, she was a reminder of Diasporic existence at a time when the founders of the nation and its literature were preoccupied with creating a new man, a new society, and a new language and literature. Despite the call to write a new *engagé* literature and strong ideological pressure to relate to the experience of national revival in the land of Israel, she kept to her depictions of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. This focus on the quotidian experience of individuals living in *Galut* was at the same time a form of resistance, a demonstration of independence at a time when Zionist education was marked by an assertion of the complete discontinuity of the Diaspora with the reality of *Erets Yisraʾel*. However, in her refusal to write about the experience of the nation in formation, Devorah Baron placed herself outside the realm of the normative discourse. This detachment from the contemporary literary scene prefigured her later withdrawal from society, a withdrawal that came at considerable expense to her family and to herself. Even in her decades-long seclusion she remained a presence in the literary world, writing her most mature and restrained work while drawing further attention to herself as an eccentric and enigmatic figure. If the first half of her life was marked by a recording of her protest against the oppression of women and social injustice, Baron would move from the impassioned depiction of society's victims to a style removed from pathos. The protest over injustice remained, but was now sublimated. Baron's designation of her earlier stories as "rags" was an attempt to conceal from the reader the development of her craft and the direct emotional and psychological involvement of her younger years. "ᶜ*Agunah*," written as it was at a liminal moment in the literary life of the author, reflects both the poetics of restraint that were to dominate in the second half of her literary life and the *cri du cœur* of her earlier work.

The largely homogenous background of the authors who participated in the renascence of modern Hebrew literature, their commitment to the revival of the language, their geographic concentration, and perhaps most importantly, their diminutive numbers, led to a dense constellation of intertextual and interpersonal relationships. Such a high degree of interconnectedness also reflects the lack of a modern tradition of evolved belletristic writing in Hebrew that could have served as a textual reservoir upon which new works could draw. Much of this self-referential connection took place around a

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nexus of traditional motifs, often dealt with in a radical or subversive manner. Such was the case with the widely treated theme of the *ᶜagunah*, the abandoned wife. Baron in her story has taken as her point of departure Agnon's treatment of the topic, as well as traditional midrashic understandings of Exile and Redemption. And yet, even if Baron had not been prompted by Agnon's story, she still would have had to engage this trope due to its centrality within the Hebrew literary corpus and her preoccupation with society's downtrodden members. Agnon's work, however, served as a perfect foil for Baron's statement on female marginality, a marginality which obtained within the larger oppression of the Jewish people in Eastern Europe. "*ᶜAgunah*" offers us an important window onto the nature of intertextual relations within the emergent Hebrew literary circle. Lamentably, although her work is suffused with pathos and pity, Baron's personal life was marked by contempt for the outside world and for herself. In a way, the two poles of her life, her position both in the center and in the periphery, mimicked that of the two female protagonists of this story. Placed on a pedestal by adoring critics and readers she was akin to the princess of the parable, and yet like the figurative *ᶜagunah*, the bitter old woman Dinah, for much of her life Baron secluded herself within the narrow space of her home and "knitted" her stories.

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