

Commentary

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Two Stories

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by **S. Y. Agnon**

S. Y. AGNON IS GENERALLY CONSIDERED TO BE THE FOREMOST LIVING WRITER of Hebrew prose. In addition to his numerous novels and short stories, he has also published anthologies of selections from Hebrew classics; one such, *Yamim Noraim*, was translated into English as *The Days of Awe*, and the interested reader may find an excerpt from it in COMMENTARY of September 1948. Agnon lives and writes in Israel, where he had first settled in 1908. The two stories below, examples of his later work, have been translated by Rabbi Jules Harlow, assistant executive director of the Rabbinical Assembly of America; they are from the tenth volume of his collected works, *Samukh V'nireh*, published in 1950 in Tel Aviv. They are here printed with the permission of Schocken Books, Agnon's publisher in Israel and America, and will be included in a volume planned by Schocken of the first collection of Agnon's stories to appear in English.

I. The Orchestra

All that year I was busy. Every day, from dawn until midnight, I sat at my desk and wrote, sometimes out of habit and sometimes pulled along by my quill, under the spell of what we presume to call inspiration. Because of this, I diverted my

attention from the rest of my affairs. When I did remember them, I only remembered to push them aside. However, on the day before Rosh Hashanah I said to myself: “A new year is approaching and I have left many letters unanswered. Let me sit down and answer them and begin the new year with no obligations.”

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As I conduct myself every day, so I did that day, except for one thing. I was accustomed to waking every day at sunrise, but that day I awoke at three in the morning, for it was the night of *Zekhor Brit*, a night on which people rise to recite *Selichot* earlier than usual.

Before I sat down to attend to the letters, I thought to myself, “A new year is beginning, and it is only proper to begin it in a state of purity. If I should not have the time to bathe in the river, because of these letters, I will draw myself a tub of warm water.”

At that moment, Tcharne¹ happened to be at my house. This was the old woman Tcharne who used to boast to me about the fact that she had been a servant in my grandfather’s house before I was born. Tcharne said to me, “Your wife is busy preparing for the holiday, and you make extra work for her. Come to your grandfather’s house, I will draw a hot bath for you.”

Her suggestion seemed a good one. “I do need to have my hair cut in honor of Rosh Hashanah, and on the way to the barber I will come to bathe.”

I looked through the letters, trying to decide which deserved to be answered first. Since they were many and time was short, and since it was impossible in one day to answer everything people had written over the entire year, I thought I would select the important ones, after which I would attend to the middling ones, and

then to the least important. While I was sorting them, it occurred to me to be rid of the trivial letters first, so as to be completely free to attend to the important ones.

It is the nature of the trivial to hamper. Just because it is trivial and not at all essential, it is hard to have to turn one's mind to it. And if such a trivial letter contains anything at all important, then you are faced with two problems: what was on the writer's mind, and what answer is he looking for. My desire to answer grew strong to the degree in which I knew that I had nothing to answer, for if I left the letters unanswered, they would bother me, their very existence being a bother, since whenever I remember them I come to petty thoughts.

I took up my quill to write, but I could write nothing. How strange! All year I had been writing effortlessly, and now that I had to write two or three casual lines, my quill would not budge. I laid that letter aside, and picked up another.

This was not a letter, but a ticket for a concert which the King of Musicians was going to conduct. I have heard that whoever listens to him becomes rejuvenated. A story is told of a man who went to all the concerts regularly without being in the slightest moved by them, so that he thought he did not understand music. Once he happened to attend a concert of this conductor. Afterward he said, "Now I know that I understand music. But all the musicians I have heard up until now do not know what music is." I put the concert ticket in my pocket.

The days before holidays are short. Some, coming in the fall or winter, have fewer hours of daylight, and some are short because of the time taken up by holiday preparations. The day before Rosh Hashanah is especially short, both because of early sunset and preparing for the Day of Judgment. By noon, I had not answered a single letter. I put the letters aside, and I said to myself, "Between the first and

the tenth of the month, I will do what I have been unable to do until now.” It would have been good to begin the new year free of obligations, but what could I do? The trivial letters contained nothing that could help me answer them.

I set out for my grandfather’s house, to bathe for the holiday, in the bath Tcharne had drawn for me. When I reached the house, I found the door locked. I kept circling the house, all four sides, and whenever I reached the door, I stopped to knock.

A neighbor peeped out from behind the trellis at her window. “You must want Tcharne. She went to the market to buy some new fruit, so that she could say *She-he-che-ya-nu* upon it.” I continued to circle the house until Tcharne returned.

Properly, that old woman ought to have apologized to me, since she had made me wait, and stolen my time. But not only did she not apologize, she just stood there and chattered. If my memory does not fail me, she told me she had found a pomegranate, and that even though it was rotting, its seeds had not fallen out.

From the town hall tower, three chimes suddenly were heard. I looked at my watch, and saw that three hours had already passed. My watch always differs with the clock of the town hall, but on that day the two had made peace. And from the heavens, too, there seemed to be agreement. Had I tarried so long on the way, and had I been so long circling the house? In any case, three hours were gone, leaving me with barely two and a half hours before the start of Rosh Hashanah, and that old woman continued chattering about a pomegranate which was rotting and about its seeds which had not fallen out.

I interrupted her to ask, “Have you drawn my bath? Is the water hot?”

Tcharne set down the basket in her hand, and cried out, “O my God in heaven! I did intend to draw a bath for you!”

“And you have not done so.”

“I have not done so,” she said. “I will do it right away.”

“Hurry, Tcharne, hurry! Today won’t last forever!”

She picked between the points of her teeth with her finger. “You don’t need to rush me. I know that time does not stand still, and I won’t stand still either. I am going into the house to light the fire and heat the water for you, and your hot bath is almost ready.”

I strolled in front of the house while the water was being heated. The old judge passed by. I remembered a question which I wanted to ask. But I was afraid that we would talk so much that I would not have time to bathe for Rosh Hashanah, for once you approach this judge, he does not let you go. I put my question aside for another time and didn’t approach him. To help pass the time, I took out the concert ticket and I noticed that the concert was scheduled for the first night of Rosh Hashanah. It was strange; I, who am not a concert-goer, had been invited to a concert for the first night of Rosh Hashanah. I put back the ticket in my pocket, and I continued my stroll in front of the house.

Orah,² my little niece, appeared, she whose voice is as sweet as the voice of a violin. She is like a violin which the fiddler has leaned against an unsteady wall, only to have the wall fall on it. I saw that she was depressed.

“Where to and where from, Orah? You look like a doe who went to a spring and found no water.”

Orah said, “I am going away from here.”

“Where are you going, and why? You have always wanted to see the famous conductor, and now that he is here to conduct our orchestra you’re going away.”

Orah wept bitterly. “Oh, dear uncle, I have no ticket!”

I laughed with a full heart. "Let me wipe away your tears," I said to her.

Lovingly I gazed at her and thought, "How good it is to be able to satisfy the desire of this precious child. Of all the world's delights, music is the most delightful for her, and of all the world's musicians, she is intoxicated with love of the conductor who this very night will conduct the great orchestra."

I reached into my pocket, to take out the ticket, to give it to Orah. Again I smiled with a full heart, like a man who is able to benefit someone. But Orah was unaware of my good intentions. She hung herself around my neck, and gave me a goodbye kiss. I was distracted and forgot what I was looking for, so I did not give Orah the ticket. While I stood there, astonished and amazed, Tcharne came to call me.

The stove was burning, the bathtub was polished and bright, and the water in the bathtub bubbled and rose toward me. But I had no strength to bathe. Even time was against me. I told my brother, "You bathe, for I am a weak man, and if I bathe in hot water, I have to rest afterwards, and there is not enough time now."

I left the bath. Walking home, I took off my hat and held it in my hand. A wind passed by, ruffling my hair. Where was my head? While waiting for the bath, I certainly could have gone to the barber. I looked up at the sky. The sun was already about to set. I walked on home, my head lowered in depression. My daughter came out to greet me, dressed in her holiday clothes. She stretched a finger into a hole of air and said, "Light!"

"What is she talking about?" I asked myself. "The sun has set, there is not a bit of light. Or perhaps she means the candles which have been kindled for the holiday."

I saw the candles. "The holy day has begun, I must hurry to the synagogue." My daughter looked at my old clothes and placed her small hands over her new dress, trying to hide it, so as not to embarrass her father who wears his old clothes. She was close to weeping, over herself for wearing a new dress while her father wears old clothes, and over her father who wears old clothes at the moment when a new year has arrived.

After the evening meal, I went outdoors. The sky was black, but many stars sparkled in it, lighting up its darkness. Not a single person was outside, all of the houses were sunk in sleep. I, too, began to sink into sleep. But this sleep was not really a sleep, for I could feel my feet walking. I walked and walked until I reached a place where I heard music. I knew that I had arrived at the concert hall. I took out the ticket and I entered.

The hall was full. Male and female violinists, male and female drummers, trumpeters, and players of other instruments, all of them were standing, dressed in black, playing without pause. The great conductor was nowhere to be seen, but the musicians performed as if someone were standing over them, wielding his baton. All the male and female musicians were friends or acquaintances of mine, I recognized them from the various places in which I had lived. How did it happen that all my friends, men and women, were here together, all in one orchestra?

I took a seat and watched intently. Each musician plays by himself, but all the strains are blended into one song. Every man and woman is joined to his or her instrument, and the instruments are joined to the floor of the temple, but each player thinks that he alone is bound, he is too ashamed to ask his neighbor to set him free. Or perhaps the musicians know that they are joined to their instruments and that their instruments are joined to the floor, only they believe that of their own volition they and their instruments are bound and that they play of their own volition. But this much is certain: though they never take their eyes from their instruments, they cannot see what their hands are doing, because they are blind, to a man. And I am afraid that even their ears do not hear what they play, they have become deaf from playing so much.

I slid out of my seat and inched my way to the door. The door was open, and a man whom I had not seen when I entered stood in the doorway. He resembled all other doormen, yet there was in him something of the character of the old judge who does not leave you alone once you approach him.

I said to him, "I should like to leave."

He took my words into his mouth, and answered me with my own voice. "To leave? Why?"

"I have drawn a bath for myself, and I must hurry before it gets cold."

He answered me in a voice which would have frightened even a stronger man. "It's boiling! It's boiling! Your brother has already been scalded in it."

I said in apology, "I was busy with letters and had no time to bathe."

He asked, "What letters?"

I showed him a letter. He bent over me and he said, "Don't you know that *I* wrote this letter?"

"I tried to answer you."

He looked at me. "What did you try to answer?"

My words were stifled by his voice, my eyes closed and I began groping with my hands. Suddenly I found myself standing in front of my house.

My daughter came out. "I'm bringing you a candle," she said.

I asked her, "Do you think that candle will light up my darkness?"

Before she could bring the candle, fire burst from the stove and burned in a circle around her. A woman stood in front of the stove, adding wood to the fire. Because of the fire and the smoke, I couldn't look, and I was unable to see if it was the old woman Tcharne or Orah, my niece, standing in front of the stove, stoking the fire.

Dread overcame me, and I stood as if joined to the ground. I was depressed, for at a time when all good sleepers slept, I was awake. Yet, to be exact, I was not the only one awake, the stars in heaven were also awake. By the light of the stars I saw what I saw. I felt insignificant, and so my words were stifled within me.

II. Another Tallit

About my other prayer shawls I have already told. So now I merely add what happened on Yom Kippur with the *tallit* which I had left in the synagogue of my grandfather, may he rest in peace.

That Yom Kippur, I had the notion to pray with my grandfather. Because I lived far from the synagogue and because I had stayed in bed too long that morning, I arrived after the chanting of *Pesukei Dezimra*. This is truly regrettable, for on Yom Kippur, at my grandfather's synagogue, they recite this part of the service verse by verse, in a special chant. Already in my childhood, before I knew the meaning of the words, whenever the cantor wrapped his *tallit* around his face and chanted *Chei Haolamim*, I would be perplexed, for the cantor called to Him in a loud voice even though He was right there! Why did he cover his face? If he uncovered his face, the whole world would be filled with a great joy such as I felt when I played hide-and-seek with my father. We used to look for each other until, finally, I would uncover my face, and then we found each other.

When I entered the synagogue, my grandfather brought his face out of the folds of his *tallit*, and turned here and there, searching out a seat for me in the synagogue which was already filled with worshippers. By the east wall, to the right of my grandfather, sat a group of old men, each looking different from all the others and, it goes without saying, from other men in general. Their faces were wrinkled like raisins, their beards looked like cinnamon sticks. Their eyes, which had no lashes, were bloodshot, yet from their eyes there streamed a joy so substantial you could feel it with your hands. How did they all come to be in one place, in my

grandfather's synagogue, and why were their features so different? One of them, who understood what my grandfather wanted of him, answered in Aramaic: "The law for Yom Kippur is not like that of Passover which states that all who want can sit and eat." To paraphrase his statement in terms of the matter at hand, we might say, "Today I am not obliged to be pushed around to furnish a seat for one who has none."

I was disturbed that my grandfather should be troubled on my account and I said to him, "Please, do not bother about me. I shall find a place for myself."

I was just talking. This was his synagogue and he could find no place for me. How could I find a seat by myself? However, my grandfather was troubled not only because there was no place for me, but because I had come so late. I deliberated: perhaps I should tell him that I prayed the morning service at the synagogue in my neighborhood. But it is not nice for one to make his grandfather a cause for telling lies.

Because of the crowding and the heat and the candles and the great number of worshippers, the roof of my mouth was dry. Leibel, the Zaddik's grandson, came over to me. "Come with me," he said. I didn't know why he asked me to go with him, but I was drawn to him, so I went.

When he had brought me to his house, he left me in the hall, and came back with a pitcher which he offered me to sniff at, so that my burning thirst should be eased.

I took the pitcher in both my hands and brought it up to my nose, all the while amazed: why did he fill the pitcher with fruit juice? Couldn't he find a little water? Leibel's blank face showed no desire to answer my questions. Meanwhile, the juice in the pitcher actually began to froth up toward my teeth. I sucked in my lips to shield my teeth from the fruit juice. But it continued bubbling up from the lip of the pitcher to my lips, frothing around my nose, gushing up to bring its taste to my mouth. I was filled with anger at Leibel. I seized him and dragged him after me, and it looked as though we were walking together.

When we reached the synagogue, my grandfather again gave me a troubled glance. Could he have sensed what had happened? I acted as if there were some other explanation.

“You are upset because I stand here without a *tallit* on. I’ll get my *tallit*, the one that’s here in your synagogue, and wrap myself in it right away.”

I looked up to see if he was satisfied, and I saw that they had brought benches into the synagogue and placed them to the left of the Holy Ark, one on top of the other, like the steps of a bathhouse. A man whose name I do not wish to mention was standing on the top step, wearing some type of baker’s hat, and chanting hymns which were not from the Yom Kippur service. A small boy—his son or grandson—stood at his side, accompanying the hymns with foolish gesticulations. Half the congregation was smiling at them. How did they get here? And when did they get here?

Meanwhile, they stepped down and went away. “What is this?” I asked myself. “When my grandfather was looking for a place for me, why didn’t he look to the left of the Ark? There were many benches and many empty places there. And then again, how could that man leave in the middle of services, and where did he go?”

My grandfather looked at me. Suddenly I reached into a hole in a table and brought out my *tallit*. I had often looked for my *tallit* there without finding it, but now I found it. Unless you say that someone else had taken it and then returned it, it is an amazing thing indeed.

As I prepared to wrap myself in my *tallit*, I saw that one of the fringes was missing. A certain fellow whom we usually ignore though he never ignores us whispered to me: “Your *tallit* has only three fringes.” I began deliberating: what is he telling me? Don’t I know that a *tallit* with only three fringes cannot be used? Or did he want to remind me of a forgotten tradition: while a man is alive, even though he may be

holding a *tallit* of three fringes in his hand, he is not allowed to wear it. But when he is dead, they pursue him with a proper *tallit* of four fringes, pluck out one fringe, and force him to wear it.

Depression overcame me. Not because of what had been whispered to me, but because of this holy day of Yom Kippur which had passed by without a prayer, without anything.

¹ A name derived from the Russian for “dark” or “black.”

² A name derived from the Hebrew for “light.”