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"Ma'aseh ha-Menorah"

Agnon's "Tale of the Menorah" between Buczacz and Modern Israel

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Agnon's "Ma'aseh ha-Menorah," "The Tale of the Menorah," first appeared in *Atidot: Rivon le-Noar,* a cultural anthology produced quarterly for Israeli teens by the Jewish Agency in time for Hanukkah, 1956.[2] It was subsequently integrated into *Ir u-Meloah*, published posthumously in 1973.[3] The title of our tale plays on Numbers 8:4, "And this is the making (*ma'aseh*) of the lampstand." It is a double entendre. The noun *ma'aseh* refers to a tale or story in both classical and modern Hebrew. In the participle form of Numbers 8, however, it refers to the fabrication of *the* lampstand, *ha-menorah*. Agnon's story (*ma'aseh*) then, is the tale of the ongoing "making"

1. Many thanks to Jeffrey Saks, Vladimir Levin, Sergey R. Kravtsov, Joshua Karlip and Leah Bierman Fine for their wise counsel and many kindnesses in the preparation of this article. It is dedicated in memory of my friend Ozer Glickman ז״ל, who truly believed in and exemplified "the eternity of Israel"—in all of its (and his) amazing complexity.

2 Agnon, *Atidot: Rivon le-Noar*, 3–11.

3 Agnon, *Ir uMeloah*, 29–37. Owing to its greater availability, I cite this version throughout, and follow the translation of David Stern published in Agnon, *A City in Its Fullness*, eds. Mintz and Saks, 44–56.

Figure 3.1: Hanukkah Menorah, Poland, eighteenth century, North Carolina Museum of Art (photo: Steven Fine).

(*ma'aseh*) of a particular menorah that exemplifies all menorahs. Beyond that, its first publication was as a Hanukkah story, even though the subject was a seven-branched menorah and not a Hanukkah menorah. This publication, then, intimately associates the Temple-like menorah of the tale with the Hanukkah season in a palimpsest that is, in fact intrinsic to the holiday and its ritual vessel. "Ma'aseh ha-Menorah" was first published at the height of a kind of "menorah craze" at mid-century, when belles-lettres, academic studies, archaeological discoveries and visual representations of the biblical lampstand were central to the Jewish public agenda, in no small part owing to the choice of the menorah as a central Jewish icon and then of the Arch of Titus menorah for the "symbol" of the State of Israel (1949).[4] Menorahs were everywhere. From soap and insurance to postage stamps, building facades, the Knesset garden to chocolate Hanukkah candy, scholarship and even comic books, the menorah was a framing element of Israeli visual culture and civil religion. "Ma'aseh ha-Menorah" placed Agnon at the center of the excitement. It expresses what I see as a rather jaundiced—if camouflaged—perspective on the national symbol that was shared by others within his religious Zionist milieu.

Atidot was edited by Shimshon Meltzer and Benzion Benshalom. Meltzer was a prominent Yiddish and Hebrew author and translator born

4. See Fine, *The Menorah* and the bibliography there.

in Tluste in Galicia (now Ukraine). Benshalom was associated with the publication of *Atidot* throughout its history. Meltzer positioned himself, like Agnon, as a bridging agent between Eastern European Jewish life and modern Israel. His literary work often steered to themes and subjects dear to Agnon, and the 1967 edition of Meltzer's collection, *Or Zarua: Sefer ha-Shirot ve-ha-Baladot ha-Shalem* was dedicated to Agnon. Within its original frame in *Atidot*, "Ma'aseh ha-Menorah" is accompanied by two black and white woodcuts of rather low quality, though they reflect an approach brought into the Zionist ethos by Jacob Steinhardt and deployed elsewhere by his student, Avigdor Arikha, who illustrated a number of Agnon stories during the 1950s and early 1960s.[5] Each image shows stages in the history of Agnon's menorah against the Chagall-esque background of traditionally garbed Eastern European Jews in a shtetl setting. This nostalgia is far more sugary and wistful than Agnon's often cutting, if loving, construction of prewar Europe and provides an additional overlay to Agnon's social commentary. The Buczacz menorah is part and parcel of the complexities of the modern menorah, its deployment in modern Israeli culture, and, for its first readers, the complexities of the Eastern European Jewish heritage and "Zionist" identity in early Israel.[6]

The ultimate home of our tale in *Ir u-Meloah* is different. The story is placed among a series of vignettes that present the town of Buczacz and its synagogue in microcosm of Eastern European Jewry.[7] It is prefaced with a short tale called "The Other Vessels That Were in the Synagogue," as an exemplar of the vessels made, lost and preserved down to the final destruction by the Nazis—"taken by the evil skum followers of the repulsive skum [Hitler] who killed the entire town and left not one Jew alive." Agnon epitomizes all of the vessels through "Ma'aseh ha-Menorah," explaining that were he to tell all the stories of all the vessels "we would not be able to."[8] In this way, he deploys a story published first as a Hanukkah tale as a larger example of the fate of his town and its sacred vessels. This gloss on the tale allows Agnon to weave "Ma'aseh ha-Menorah" seamlessly into his opus, making explicit his sense the menorah represents all the holy vessels, but is not unique among them. My purpose here is to explore something of the cultures in which this story was created and within which it was received.

5. See Silberman, *Iyyurim le-Sippurei Agnon,* especially unpaginated pages 5, 8–9.
6. Mintz, *Ancestral Tales*, 20–22.
7 Mintz, "I Am Building a City," xvi, xxv; Mintz, *Ancestral Tales*, 1–31.
8. Agnon, *Ir uMeloah,* 29.

THE TALE

"Ma'aseh ha-Menorah" is the tale of a large seven-branched brass menorah in the synagogue of Agnon's hometown of Buczacz in Galicia—today Ukraine. As Agnon tells it, a seven-branched menorah was given to the synagogue by the king of Poland, a gift to a communal leader who served as a court Jew and Jewish communal leader. The gift represented what the king believed was fitting for Judaism and represents for Agnon the space between Jewish self-understanding and the ways that the dominant society understood and influenced Jews. His language resonated with biblical moments as read through Rabbinic interpretation of biblical cases of the dangers for Jews inherent in entering the royal court. These are epitomized in classical rabbinic terms through Esther and Mordecai, Joseph and Pharaoh, and Jacob and Esau—Esau being a cipher for all gentiles, and especially Rome and Christian Rome. Agnon frames the story in a chain that begins with "and it happened in the days of . . . ," *va-yehi bimei* (Esther 1:1), a phrase that the ancient rabbis read as a harbinger of bad things to come.[9] This sense of eternality frames the entire story, which Agnon makes explicit in the conclusion of the tale.

Accepting the gift despite reservations, the Jews of Buczacz felt themselves in a real predicament:

> When they brought the menorah, which was a gift from the king, to the synagogue, the Jews saw it and beheld its seven branches. They said, we cannot place this menorah in the synagogue. If we do, they said to themselves, we will sin against God; on the other hand, if we do not set it in the synagogue, we will insult the king and his gift.
>
> They did not know what counsel to take for themselves. Even Nahman, the counselor to the king, had no solution. He said, this has all befallen us because I frequented the court of the king.
>
> But God saw their distress, and He set the idea in their heads to remove one branch from the menorah and thus make it into an ordinary candelabrum. Then if they placed the menorah in the synagogue, there would be no sin for them in doing so. And if someone mentioned it to the king, they could say, from the day that our Temple was destroyed, we make nothing without marking upon it a sign in remembrance of the destruction.

9. See Esther Rabbah 1, proem 11, ed. Tabory, 17–24 and the notes there.

> So they removed the middle branch. Then they brought the menorah into the house of God and placed it on the ark and lit its candles.

In a true balancing act typical of both Jewish legal tradition and a well-tuned political sense (*shtadlanut*) the synagogue leadership removed the central branch, so as not to violate Talmudic strictures—and to maintain their own scruples and agency. Still, the location of the menorah is unusual, as the standard location for a large Hanukkah lamp next to the ark was taken. It was perched on the reading table.

During the infamous Khmelnytskyi uprising (1648–49) when the community was massacred, and the synagogue christened a church "the town's gentiles made the house of God into a church for their gods." The lampstand was buried in the Strypa River by a non-Jewish synagogue attendant whose task had been maintaining the synagogue lamps on Sabbaths and holidays. This is the second apparently benign act of gentile agency in the story, this servant seemingly protecting the bronze lamp as one might an icon, a relic, or a sanctified Church serving vessel. The lampstand was forgotten, only later being recovered from the Strypa after the community was reestablished with the reassertion of Polish rule. Jewish children found it in a kind of ghoulish resurrection of the dead during elaborate late-night penitential prayers (*selihot*) that precede Rosh ha-Shanah:

> That year, on a Saturday night at the close of the Sabbath, on the night that was also the first night for reciting the Selihot, the penitential hymns, the young children were shining candles over the surface of the Strypa. They were doing this in order to make light for the slain martyrs who had drowned in rivers, streams, and lakes. On the first night of Selihot, all the dead whom our enemies have drowned come to pray to the eternal God in the same synagogue in which they prayed during their lifetimes. The other nights of Selihot are dedicated to those martyrs who died by fire, to those who were stabbed to death, to the ones who were strangled, and to those who were murdered. For on account of their numbers, the building could not contain all the slain at once. As a result, they divided up the nights among them, one congregation of martyrs for each night of prayer.
>
> Now while the children were on the banks of the Strypa shining their candles, a great menorah such as they had never seen before suddenly shone forth from beneath the water. They said, that must be the menorah of the dead; for the dead bring with

> them their own menorahs when they come to pray. Their hearts quaked in fear, and the children fled.
>
> Some grown-ups heard the story about the menorah that the children had told, and they said, Let us go and see for ourselves! They went and came to the Strypa. Indeed, there was a menorah in the Strypa. The story is true, they said. It is a menorah.

The forgotten and discovered menorah was placed in a prominent location in the new small synagogue. A generation later, not realizing "that their forefathers had already repaired the menorah when they cut off one of its branches to avoid sinning against God or the king" the local Jews installed a large "white" eagle, the Polish national "symbol," in place of the missing central stalk as a sign of Polish patriotism. With the Austrian conquest of Buczacz (1772), the Polish eagle became something of a scandal and was replaced—on order of Austrian army officers—with an Austrian two-headed eagle. This process repeated itself when Poland revolted, and a clearly modernizing Jewish Polish patriot attended the synagogue:

> And so it happened, as he was standing before the Torah, that the man saw the two-headed eagle. He began to scream, This is an abomination! An abomination! Then he grabbed the hammer from around his waist and struck at the two-headed eagle. He paid no attention to the other worshipers, not even when they pleaded with him to stop and not desecrate the Sabbath. He did not listen to them until he had broken the Austrian eagle from off the menorah and cast it to the ground.

Austrian rule was restored and a new double-headed eagle manufactured. Like the Polish eagle before it, the previous eagle was comically melted into Hanukkah dreidels. This detail makes the Hanukkah connection and snidely referencing the frivolity of this repeating process.[10] With World War I and the Russian army approaching the Austrians took all of the metal from the synagogue to be melted for munitions, all except the menorah, which the metalworker buried. Finally, through a miraculous interpretation of Exodus 25, the portion of *Terumah* (which describes tabernacle menorah), a Jewish soldier, maimed in the trenches who had returned to Buczacz, succeeded with the metalworker in digging up the lampstand from beneath the destroyed ruins of the metalworker's own home. It was returned once again to the synagogue but concerned that the Ukrainians might revolt, the Buczacz Jews once again removed the eagle.

10. Many thanks to Jeffrey Saks for his thoughts on Agnon's deployment of dreidels.

To reinforce the widespread futility felt across Europe, especially by Jews, at the end of World War I, the metalworker once again decides to melt the eagle and create dreidels for children:

> He [the soldier] added, Let us also not make a one-headed eagle, like the eagle that is the national insignia of Poland. I have heard that the Ruthenians have revolted against Poland. If they see the eagle of Poland in our synagogue, they will say that we have prepared to go to war against the Ruthenian nation.

The moral of the story, symbolized by the menorah, its broken central stalk, its transitory eagles and multiple dreidels is that "One kingdom comes and another kingdom passes away. But Israel remains forever."[11] Agnon's menorah, in all of its cultural complexity, is a metaphor for the Jewish people itself, and the eternality of Israel being central to Agnon's thought.[12] The story ends at World War I, his *Atidot* readership being all too aware of the recent fate of Buczacz—and of the Jews symbolized by its maimed menorah. The Holocaust connection is made specific in the prologue to our tale in *Ir u-Meloah*.

CONTEXTS

In constructing his "Tale of the Menorah," Agnon—and his audience—were certainly aware that he had placed his Eastern European synagogue lamp, odd as it was, as a Judaized gift of a non-Jewish ruler, in a long tradition of lost and found Jewish artifacts—of Jewish storytelling about gone but always present objects. The origin point for this sense of loss and memory of the Temple. The loss of the Temple vessels in 586 BCE, and their restoration, provided a template for Jewish, and then Christian, thinking about loss and restoration. This is certainly how Jews have read the extended descriptions of the Tabernacle in the Book of Exodus, repeated twice in the "received" Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible. Comprising large sections of Exodus, Jewish tradition has certainly looked back wistfully to the Tabernacle and its vessels, and the relatively more recent losses of the First and Second Temples. The very invocation of these Divinely ordained vessels in words, in Exodus compulsively, symbolically brings them back, and has sustained

11. Cf. Ecclesiastes 1:4 and the rabbinic interpretation cited in Rashi's comment.

12. See "HaSiman," reproduced in *Ir u-Meloah,* 695, where Agnon refers to the year 5689 (1929), the year of the Hebron Massacre, during which his home in Talpiot was marauded, as having the numerical value of *Netzah Yisrael*, the "eternity of Israel."

hope for their physical return throughout Jewish history. They are what biblical historian Peter Ackroyd called a "continuity symbol," which is certainly the leitmotif of Agnon's tale.[13] Nineteenth century Christians, and Jews, piously believed that the menorah was buried in the silt of the Tiber.[14] Agnon's deployment of the Strypa falls within this tradition. Many other myths developed along these lines, leading to the contemporary urban legend that it is hidden in the Vatican.[15] Within nascent Zionist contexts, the modern discovery of menorahs in archaeological sites was exceptionally important for the developing national/cultural ethos. This began with the Zionist "discovery" of the Arch of Titus menorah during the latter nineteenth century, through the uncovering of the Hammath Tiberias menorah by the first Zionist "archaeologist" Nahum Slouschz at Hammat Tiberias in 1921.[16] Presented in academic and popular literatures, this carefully staged discovery was featured in an early Zionist film by Yaakov Ben Dov, produced by Ben Dov's "Menorah" film company.[17] Agnon had a significant predecessor for this story, a Zionist novella produced by Stefan Zweig called *Der begrabene Leuchter*, published in Vienna in 1937 and translated immediately into English as *The Buried Candelabrum* (New York, 1937)[18] and into Hebrew as *Ha-Menorah Ha-Genuzah* in 1946.[19] Agnon had been in contact with Zweig, and his correspondence dating to 1920 is preserved the Zweig Archive in Fredonia, New York.[20] Set in the age of Justinian, Zweig's lampstand underwent travels and travails. Ultimately it was buried in the soil of *Eretz Yisrael* by the road leading to Jerusalem from the coast awaiting by pious Jews awaiting modern "redemption"—presumably by the rising Zionist movement. Scholars of all sorts caught the "menorah bug," most prominently classical historian Yohanan (Hans) Lewy, who imagined that the hidden menorah could be uncovered in the ruins of Justinian's Nea

13. Ackroyd, "The Temple Vessels," 166–81.

14. Fine, *The Menorah,* 175–79.

15. Fine, *The Menorah,* 185–207.

16. Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World*, 23–27.

17. Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World*, 23–27.

18. Zweig, *Der begrabene Leuchter*; Zweig, *The Buried Candelabrum*, tr. Paul and Paul; Fine, *The Menorah,* 180.

19. Tr. Fishman.

20. This correspondence is preserved in the archives of Reed Library, State University of New York, Fredonia, together with an unpublished Yiddish translation. Many thanks to Kimberly R. Taylor for making these available to me.

Church in Jerusalem.[21] In his late novel *Shira,* Agnon invoked his colleague, the father of Jewish archaeology himself, Eleazar Lippa Sukenik, parodying this intrepid scholar (whom Agnon is known to have respected), his search for Jewish artifacts in the antiquities shops of mandatory Jerusalem, and his discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.[22] This sense of discovery and of recovery is essential to the Zionist ethos, with its visions of returning the menorah to modern Jerusalem, and literally marching it under the Arch of Titus in a reverse restoration. This excitement was heightened with the choice of the Arch of Titus menorah as "symbol" of the state of Israel in 1949.[23]

"Ma'aseh ha-Menorah" is more complex. Agnon's seven-branched menorah was not uncovered by archaeologists, nor was it found in the silt of the Tiber or in a Nazi assemblage. Rather, it was planted in the silt and soil of Buczacz—over and over again. It is clearly modeled on large brass synagogue Hanukkah menorahs of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which often have eagles as finials to the central branch—either with one head to denote Poland or two for the Holy Roman/Hapsburg Empire. These were attached to the lampstand with threaded bases for easy installation and removal, depending upon communal preference.[24] These often-huge Hanukkah menorahs were placed to the side of the Torah ark—a position already filled in the Buczacz synagogue.[25]

A silver Hanukkah lamp standing 100 cm. tall from the Dubno great synagogue parallels nicely the complexities of Agnon's menorah, and points to the inspiration for our story. This lamp is described in considerable detail as part of a tour of the Jewish community of Dubno by Rabbi Hayyim Zeev Margaliot in his Hebrew volume *Dubno Rabbati,* issued by the publishing company associated with the *maskilic* Hebrew newspaper *Ha-Tzfirah* in Warsaw in 1910. Margaliot writes that within the synagogue is

21. Lewy, "A Note on the Fate of the Sacred Vessels of the Second Temple," 123–25, and was collected in his posthumous collection, *Studies in Jewish Hellenism*, 255–58; see Fine, *The Menorah,* 49–52, 54, 74, 180.

22. Agnon, *Shira*, 141–42. On Agnon's acquaintance with Sukenik, see Laor, *S.Y. Agnon,* 341–42.

23. Mishory, *Lo and Behold*, 138–64; Fine, *The Menorah,* 134–62.

24. On standing Hanukkah menorahs, see Narkiss, *The Hanukkah Lamp*, 71–81; Braunstein, *Five Centuries of Hanukkah Lamps from theJewish Museum,* 12, 18–19, 117–20.On two-headed eagles in Eastern European synagogues, Rodov, "The Eagle, Its Twin Heads and Many Faces," 77–129.

25. On the placement of free standing menorahs in synagogues in this region, Kravtsov, "Synagogue Architecture of Volhynia," 87–88.

> a large and heavy Hanukkah menorah, whose candles they light on the eve of every Sabbath and holiday, is made of pure silver. It is made in great beauty (*pe'er*) and glory (*hadar*) with a silver eagle with two heads above. Two small silver tablets are attached to the menorah. On one I see written: "This making of the menorah (*ma'aseh ha-menorah*) was renewed by the Society of the Tavern keepers who added to it much silver, 5576 [1816]." On the second is written: "An eternal sign and offering of remembrance (*minhat azkarah*) of the *gabbai*[*s*] [sexton(s) of the society] of the tavern keepers and the members of the society. In the year 5597 [1837] the pure menorah that was donated to the synagogue long before (*me'az*) was stolen. It was found damaged, and by the good of their hearts they repaired it again beautifully and finished on Hoshanah Rabba of 5598 [1838]. Forever it will be, until the coming of the Redeemer." They say that this menorah was stolen by a brazen uncircumcised [gentile] whose job it was to extinguish the lamps on Sabbath nights. After he broke it up for sale, he put its parts in a sack and brought them to an acquaintance of his to sell them. A certain man was there and saw this, and the situation was made known by him to members of the [Jewish] community.[26]

Sergey R. Kravtsov and Vladimir Levin note that the Dubno menorah was illustrated by artist Ksawery Pillati in a late nineteenth century drawing topped with a single-headed Polish eagle and not with the double-headed eagle donated in 1816.[27] When the lampstand was photographed in 1910, however, the double-headed eagle had returned! The Dubno Hanukkah menorah, which according to inscriptional testimony was lovingly cared for over generations by a single religious society. Over this period the lampstand saw the addition of a double-headed eagle, theft, reconstruction, and at some point, the replacement of the double-headed eagle finial with a single eagle, and the return of the double-headed exemplar. It was destroyed during World War II, together with the Jewish community of Dubno as a whole—a fact that we know with hindsight (as the readers of *Atidot* and narrator of *Ir u-Meloah* did as well). The repair of the Dubno lamp was associated in a memorial inscription with the biblical "making of the menorah," *ma'aseh ha-menorah*—as, of course, was the lampstand of Agnon's tale. Finally, the pious hope of the inscription, "Forever it will be, until the coming of the Redeemer," rings with messianic tone evident

26. Margaliot, *Dubno Rabbati*, 28. See Kravtsov and Levin, *Synagogues in Ukraine, Volhynia,* 233, 236.

27. Kravtsov and Levin, *Synagogues in Ukraine, Volhynia,* 233, 236.

in Agnon's conclusion, "But Israel remains forever." Margaliot's excursus on the menorah is set within the frame of a tour of the synagogues of Dubno and their sacred vessels, as is Agnon's tale in its final literary frame. It is composed in a maskilic Hebrew not unlike Agnon's archaicizing style, replete with biblical and rabbinic references. Agnon almost certainly knew the story of the Dubno menorah, as Margaliot's book is preserved in his personal library.[28] Read in light of Margaliot's tale of the nefarious *Shabbos goy*,[29] Agnon's reference to a gentile servant burying the brass lampstand in the Strypa, to which he ascribes no motive, feels far less benign. Beyond these resonances, Kravtsov and Levin have discovered archival evidence from 1934 for the removal of a gypsum Habsburg double-headed eagle from the facade of a Buczacz synagogue.[30] The eagle was described in an official Polish government document ordering its removal as "this symbol of the times of captivity." The fact that this removal at this late date was a government decision and not that of the local Jews is notable. This change in heraldry was not unique to Jews or Jewish contexts and is documented in Galicia as early as Galician "de facto autonomy" in 1869. Our tale, built on the literary model of *Dubno Rabbati,* is thus rooted in actual political shifts in Agnon's hometown.

A similar symbolic shift took place twice during Agnon's time in the Holy Land, first with the replacement of Ottoman symbols with those of the British Mandate and then symbols of "His Majesty's Government" with the new Israeli national "symbol"—at its center the Arch of Titus menorah. Within its Zionist/early Israeli context, Agnon's menorah asserts the primacy of continuity across the generations, and not a radical "discovery" of an old-new Jewish icon for the "New Maccabees" in the soil of modern Israel. Still, the menorah of our tale began as a seven branched lampstand, and not the traditional eight-plus-one of a Hanukkah lamp. Despite its obvious similarities, it is a new creation distinguished through an essential nuance invisible to its royal Polish donor. Agnon's menorah illuminates the new-old ethos of the religious Zionist community in early Israel, one that hallowed traditional religion in a new and sometimes contradictory idiom—the physical and literary embodiment of the new-old Jew. Large

28. Many thanks to Jeffrey Saks for verifying this in the Agnon House library. Beyond the menorah episode, a broader study of how Agnon's "guide" to Buczacz is indebted to Margoliot's work is a desideratum.

29. Katz, *The "Shabbes Goy."*

30. Kravtsov and Levin, *Synagogues in Ukraine, Volhynia,* 236 n.223, Lviv National Vasyl Stefanyk Library, Ms. UK-31, fol. 431.

bird-headed Hanukkah menorahs were displayed prominently in the Bezalel National Museum (now the Israel Museum) and significantly for our discussion, in the Religious Zionist Wolfson Museum of Jewish Art. This museum was opened in the new Chief Rabbinate building in Jerusalem, Hechal Shlomo, in 1958—two years after our story appeared in print. During the early years of the state, Judaica was streaming into Israel, in no small measure owing to the work of the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction in Europe, Umberto Nahon in Italy, and immigrants/refugees from Islamic lands who brought treasures with them to Israel. Agnon may hint at the Nazi theft of cultural objects in his preface to our story in *Ir u-Meloah,* describing the Nazis who, like, previous persecutors "took" (rather than destroyed) the synagogue vessels—leaving behind only stories.[31] The objects returned, and in Agnon's day were exhibited and interpreted through exhibition—like Agnon's menorah—as both remnants of Jewish "martyrdom"[32] and iconic proof of Jewish "eternality."[33] An exquisite large brass Hanukkah menorah crowned by a two-headed eagle donated more recently to the Israel Museum makes this point implicitly. It was given to the museum by "Arthur Lejwa, a native of Kielce, in memory of the Jewish community of Kielce, annihilated in the gas chambers in 1942."[34] More than a lachrymose history of martyrdom, however, Agnon presents the ingenuity and staying power of Eastern European Jewry, his menorah injecting this theme into the old-new culture of modern Israel at a time after the Holocaust when the Eastern European Jewish experience was often viewed with scorn—or at the very least as a desire for a new beginning.

According to Agnon, the Christian king clearly thought that he was giving the synagogue an object of traditional Jewish piety. Christians had long associated the biblical lampstand with Jews, and the synagogue with the Temple. Jews had as well, applying Temple themes to the synagogue in expanding ways beginning with classical rabbinic sources. Reference to the synagogue as a "small temple," a *mikdash me'at* in rabbinic interpretation of Ezekiel 11:16 that appears in the Babylonian Talmud (Megillah 29a),

31. Agnon, *Ir u-Meloah*, 29.

32. Grossman, "The Skirball Museum JCR Research Project," 325–26, citing Jewish Museum/New York director Stephen S. Kayser.

33. Herman, "'A Brand Plucked Out of the Fire,'" 29–62, esp. 43–46; Nahon, *Holy Arks and Religious Appurtenances from Italy in Israel.*

34. Benjamin, "A Hanukkah Lamp from Poland," 48–49.

is the locus of all later conceptions. Throughout our story, Agnon himself fuses this language to refer to the sanctuary of Buczacz.

Gifts by Christian rulers to local synagogues were not unheard of in modern Europe. In eighteenth century Germany, for example, one synagogue was

> built in 1789–90 by court architect Friedrich Wilhelm von Erdmannsdorf was a round pavilion in the gardens of the Jews' patron; the synagogue was also known as the Temple of Vesta—which shows the congregation's position before emancipation as the private domain of the Grand Duke of Anhalt-Dessau.[35]

Projecting this line of reasoning into antiquity, British and then German scholars imagined that synagogues with human and mythological reliefs in the Galilee and Golan Heights were gifts by well-meaning Roman authorities, and that Jews abandoned these " pagan" buildings or removed the offensive imagery as soon as they could.[36] There is even a Talmudic precedent, a Roman emperor named Antoninus being said to have donated a *menarta*, a "lamp" of some kind, to a synagogue in late antiquity.[37] The wanted/unwanted gift described by Agnon, then, was not outlandish, and follows historical and literary precedents with which our author was certainly familiar.

Agnon played on the fact that the use of seven branched lampstands by modern Jews was anything but traditional before the latter nineteenth century. While menorah imagery was a common feature of traditional Jewish iconography, seven branched three-dimensional lampstands were unheard of among European Jews before this period owing to a Rabbinic prohibition against reproducing Temple vessels directly. Accepting the gift despite their reservations, the Jews of Buczacz set out to render Jewishly acceptable an object that the king had thought the most Jewish object of all. The removing of the central branch follows rabbinic precedent both for "nullifying" and in creating synagogue lampstands. Thus:

> Our Rabbis taught: No one may make a building in the form of the [temple] shrine [*hekhal*],
> an exedra in place of the entrance hall,
> a courtyard in place of the court,

35. Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe*, 72.

36. Fine, *Art and Judaism*, 19.

37. PT Megillah 3:2, 74a; Fine, *This Holy Place,* 80; Cohen, "The Conversion of Antoninus," 141–71.

> a table in place of the table [of the bread of the Presence],
> a menorah in place of the menorah,
> but one may make [a menorah] with five, six or eight [branches].
> Nor [may it be made] of other metals.[38]

Seven branched lampstands were known, however, from the latter nineteenth century in Jewish circles associated with Freemasonry, including Bnai Brith lodges, liberalizing synagogues ("temples") and on Zionist regalia of all sorts—especially those associated with the Bezalel School and eventually with Zionist revisionism. Agnon was well aware of the Bezalel School and its early antinomianism, and wrote of this complexity in *Tmol Shilshom* (1945).[39] Seven branched menorahs were even making inroads within Orthodox ritual, the chief rabbinate prescribing, for example, the lighting of such lamps in synagogues on the eve of the first Israel Independence day in 1949.[40]

Agnon's lamp, too, parallels modern custom. Branched menorahs had become so popular in synagogue lighting that even traditional synagogues adopted them, sometimes removing the light from the central branch to comply with the letter of the Talmudic injunction. Agnon, certainly aware of both the complexities of this gift-giving and of the very presence of altered seven branched lamps in modern synagogues, projects the contemporary Jewish solution to this modern problem of synagogue decor back to Buczacz where this "large menorah" was placed on the reading table of the synagogue and not near the ark itself, since that space was already taken (a lamp discussed explicitly in an earlier story in *Ir u-Meloah*[41]), and the local Jews knew that they had to put it somewhere! In a sense, the deletion of a branch from the royal gift is the reciprocal of decisions by eighteenth and nineteenth century synagogue communities—including Agnon's Buczacz, to create free-standing bronze (and in Dubno, silver) Hanukkah menorahs reminiscent of the Tabernacle menorah, the added branches facilitating this innovation. These communities acted on the Talmudic allowance that "one may make [a menorah] with . . . eight [branches]."[42]

38. BT Menahot 28b (and parallels); Shulḥan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 141:8.

39. Agnon, *Tmol Shilshom*, 293–94; Werses, *S.Y. Agnon Kifeshuto*, 264–90.

40. Fine, *The Menorah*, 146.

41. 19–20. [AQ]

42. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Beit HaBekhirah* 7:10 and the sources cited by Narkiss, *The Hanukkah Lamp*, 71–72.

The foreignness, subsequent "Judaization" and broad acceptance of the Buczacz seven-branched menorah resonates with themes in the then-current negotiation between religious Zionists—for whom Agnon was a culture hero—and the demands of the broader Israeli civil religion. Rabbi Isaac Halevy Herzog, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the State of Israel and a close friend of Agnon[43] was most ambivalent regarding the state "symbol" and its use of the Arch of Titus menorah on the national emblem.[44] For Herzog, a University of London trained scholar of Semitic languages, the Arch menorah was an imposition upon Jewish memory, and did not reflect an "authentic" Jewish memory itself. He writes:

> In conclusion, our government is not doing well today—when we have merited again the light of Zion, which is symbolized by the menorah, by copying specifically the image of the menorah that is on the Arch of Titus—which was apparently made by foreigners and is not wholly made in the purity of holiness, as is supported by the teachings of our teacher Moses [Maimonides], the genius of geniuses and from other sources derived by the Torah sages. Not only that, but an expert in the past [archaeologist Yigael Yadin[45]] has testified before me that the menorahs represented on caves and in the catacombs in Rome all have three feet [tripods] as do all of the menorahs illustrated on mosaics of synagogue remains in the Land of Israel. My opinion on this is clear and determined.[46]

Adamant as he was, Herzog's campaign was unsuccessful—even among religious Zionists. Within Hechal Shlomo itself, his brother-in-law, British artist David Hillman, created a stained glass window showing the Arch menorah—though as a concession, symbols of the Tribes of Israel do replace the mythological animals in the base of the Arch menorah. Similar to Agnon's conception of the Buczacz menorah, Herzog saw the Arch menorah as a foreign imposition upon Judaism to be managed over time. Unlike Herzog, however, Agnon (with Hillman) shows a way that this religiously unwelcome object might be "Judaized" and integrated into their traditionalizing Jewish memory.

Herzog's approach was closer to the plot of "Ma'aseh ha-Menorah" in dealing with the gift of a large bronze menorah sculpture to the Knesset in

43. See Agnon's eulogy for Herzog in *MeAtmzi el Atzmi*, 246–50; and Laor, *S.Y. Agnon,* 306, 400, 406–8, 487, 628.

44. Herzog, "The Shape of the Menorah in the Arch of Titus," 95–98.

45. See Fine, *The Menorah*, 138.

46. Herzog, "The Shape of the Menorah," 98.

1952. This large lampstand was created by British artist Benno Elkan as the culmination of a project funded by wealthy British Jews. The menorah was donated to the Knesset by the British Parliament. A dedicatory plaque at its base expresses the sentiments behind this gift:

> The Menorah is the work of Benno Elkan. The idea of presenting the Menorah was conceived by members of the Parliament of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland in appreciation of the establishment of a democratic parliamentary government in the State of Israel. The committee organizing the presentation included members of both Houses of Parliament and representatives of the British people of diverse faiths. Viscount Samuel, President; the Rt. Hon. Clement Davies, chairman; Dr. Alec Lerner, treasurer; Mr. Gilbert McAllister, secretary. The gift was made possible by the generosity of the people of Britain and received strong support from the leading banks of the United Kingdom and large industrial concerns. Many small donations, too numerous to record here, were received from British citizens.

Herzog was asked to judge the halakhic propriety of exhibiting this sculpture within the public sphere. Not only is a free-standing seven-branched menorah a problem in light of the Talmudic prohibition, but Elkan's lampstand is decorated with numerous human figures in three-quarters bas-relief, each scene illustrating a significant moment in Jewish history. Herzog did not suggest alterations to the lampstand, opting for a liberal interpretation of Jewish law. Rather, he ruled that the lampstand be displayed inside the Knesset building and not on the street. He hesitantly endorsed Elkan's menorah realizing "the seriousness of the matter in the event of a negative decision."[47] This "seriousness" related both to the delicate diplomatic relationship between Israel and Britain at the time, but also to the reality that the Israeli government would likely have rejected anything but a positive decision by the Chief Rabbi. The status of Judaism itself within the new state was in jeopardy on many fronts. This was expressed, as in our story, by what others considered the most Jewish of gifts, a seven-branched menorah, Herzog chose to mitigate the tension rather than exasperate it. His stipulation that the lampstand be placed indoors was ignored, and it was placed in a large garden next to the Knesset on King George V Street (and subsequently moved to its current location next to the permanent Knesset building, opened in 1966). He did not object in public

47. Herzog, *Letter to Lord Herbert Samuel.*

this time, as he did with his failed campaign against the state symbol. As in Agnon's story, we find here a menorah, a governmental force that religious Jews felt obliged to satisfy, and an artifact that was manifestly "Jewish" yet problematic to Jewish tradition. This case is in many ways more complex, a Jewish government exhibiting an otherwise illicit menorah, made by a Jewish artist and displayed in the public domain. With all of this tension beneath the surface and in full sight, Agnon's tale, both in *Atidot* and in *Ir u-Melo'ah,* asserts the "eternity of Israel"—a real continuity between the complexities of traditional Jewish existence in Eastern Europe and the experience of his Israeli readers.

"Ma'aseh ha-Menorah" is not a simple "tale of the menorah." It is an artifact of the larger menorah craze that affected Jewish life during the twentieth century, particularly at mid-century. It reflects complex and very contemporary realities—projected on and through the idealized yet deliciously complex world of Eastern European Jewry as constructed by Agnon. The changing of eagle heads in Galician synagogues, including in the "real" Buczacz, was an actual reality that Agnon transformed for his Israeli audience. The story quietly engages the lived reality in the new State of Israel, as religiously concerned Jews like Agnon—committed to the state and its institutions negotiated their sense of continuity with received tradition and allegiance to the developing new-old civil religion of modern Israel. Its publication by Meltzer in *Atidot* and its subsequent placement in *Ir u-Melo'ah* makes a still broader claim, quietly asserting continuity between Jewish life in Europe and the new Israeli culture—the menorah of Buczacz representing this continuity. Such continuity was in no way obvious to the revolutionary culture of early Israel. Israeli civil religion was in many aspects a "discovered tradition"[48] (just at Agnon's menorah was itself continually "rediscovered") and was sometimes at odds with traditional Rabbinic approaches—a complexity that Agnon's story, like his friend Rabbi Isaac Herzog in the public sphere, worked diligently to overcome even as each toiled to invoke and hence (re)imagine that very Jewish " past"—and through it the Israeli future.[49] "Ma'aseh ha-Menorah" illustrates the axiom that "One kingdom comes and another kingdom passes away. But Israel remains forever." The eternity of Israel is not a simple one in this "Ma'aseh ha-Menorah"-—not for Agnon's archetypical if somewhat comic Jews of Buczacz with their multiple eagle finials and dreidels—and not for Agnon's

48. Lewis, *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented.*

49. Mintz, *Ancestral Tales*, 13.

readership in 1950s and 1970s Israel.[50] Behind Agnon's claim of continuity, of "eternality," lurks a reality of discomforting discontinuity and a hopeful message of synthesis that Agnon wished for in the state called "the first sprouts of our redemption"—but which neither Agnon nor Herzog perceived as a completed messianic project.[51]

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50. See Sagiv, "Deep Blue: Notes on the Jewish Snail Fight," 285–313, esp. 295.

51. Rappel, *Ha-Tefillah le-Shelom ha-Medinah*.

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