



Agnon's Book of State

BETWEEN SATIRE AND TEARS

Throughout S.Y. Agnon's wide repertoire of writings, we can sense the presence of a comic mode. Known as a master ironist, comedic irony was a tool always in Agnon's mind, alongside other humorous tones that Hebrew literature's only Nobel laureate could strike at will. However, when looking at his entire canon, we must recognize that – unlike his Yiddish counterpart, Sholem Aleichem – comedy was not his specialty, no matter how entertaining we find much of his writing. When examining the ethical or moral problems facing the Jewish world, he wrote in the tragic genre. This is not to say that his darkest works are without humor, but he knew well how to marshal comic relief to diffuse tension even in his most bleak depictions of Jewish history.

His anthology of satirical pieces on life in the Jewish State, entitled "*Perakim shel Sefer HaMedina*,"¹ has been translated recently as *The Orange Peel and Other Satires*.² These stories, while not components of the backbone of Agnon's oeuvre, have significance and enduring appeal to contemporary readers for a variety of reasons. They demonstrate the artist taking his craft in a new direction – political satire. The satirist's aspiration is to amuse while arousing the reader's disapproval of societal vice by holding it up to ridicule (with a presumed didactic and remedial goal).

The short stories in the collection are send-ups of a variety of human flaws, less of the State itself than of its pompous politicians and short-sighted citizens, touching on topics

ranging from taxes and trash collection to the windbagery of speech-makers unable to effect useful action, and tensions arising from the religious-secular divide. Part of the collection's significance is in how it provides a measure of insight into Agnon's mind.

Following a medieval tradition of a poetic "*peticha*" (opening) to prayer, in which the themes of the piece of worship to be introduced are highlighted or expanded, Agnon prepared this introduction to the Mourner's *Kaddish* in 1947, to be recited "for the fallen defenders of the Land of Israel." Some have observed that the expansion of the well-known *Kaddish* was necessary in 1947, as the tally of the Six Million was still being undertaken, and the human sacrifices in defense of the fledgling Jewish homeland were growing day by day. It is composed in answer to the question of what it means to salvage the religious metaphors of serving and standing guard at the palace of a King who may have appeared to have abandoned His troops.

But even in this most serious of works, the themes of "The Book of State" are reflected, albeit in a wholly distinct tone: the sanctity and supremacy of each individual, even when he is marshaled as part of an army arrayed in defense of the collective body politic.

Each one of us is as important in His eyes as a whole regiment.

For He does not have many to set in our place.

Thus if one Jew dies (G-d forbid),

Distress falls upon the regiments of the King,

And a weakening comes to the kingdom of He who is Blessed,

For His kingdom lacks one of its regiments

And the greatness of He who is Blessed is lessened.

The death of each individual causes a lessening of G-d's kingdom on earth, therefore we recite the *Kaddish*, imploring *Yitgadal veYitkadash shemei raba* – praying that His name should be magnified on high to rectify His own diminution caused by the loss of each member of the collective below.

As opposed to treatments of this theme in his works of fiction, this is Agnon's attempt to compose liturgy (indeed, it is still ceremoniously recited at Memorial Day events throughout Israel). Unlike so much of his writing, here he does not create a pastiche of holy source material in an ironic subversion of those pious texts. Writing in Jerusalem in 1947, as the ashes in Europe were first settling, and the conflagration in *Eretz Yisrael* was just beginning, he set satire aside.

1 Literally, Chapters of the Book of State, published in his volume *Samuch veNireh*.

2 Toby Press.

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