

"ALL GOD'S MYSTERIES HE ENCRYPTED IN THE TALMUD" –
ON SHAY AGNON'S POETICS OF HALACHA

NURIT BARNEA BERNHEIM

Tel Aviv University

Abstract

From the very beginning, Agnon's writing was acknowledged as a unique literary achievement within the evolving corpus of Hebrew literature. Alongside his modern stories depicting secular life in Germany and Israel, Agnon focused on the bygone traditional diaspora-centered Jewish world. Over the years this choice became the center of dispute amongst Agnon's literary critics. It was debated how the same stories could contain two conflicting commentaries: religiosity based on Halacha, together with a disillusioned egocentric attitude of the individual psyche, characteristic of modern literature. In particular, what enabled the two conflicting outlooks to co-exist within the same narrative? This article shows that keeping his stories within of Halachic boundaries is what allowed Agnon to write traditional yet very modern (and vice versa – modern yet very traditional) stories. Taking these interpretive liberties can be viewed as a paradox: secularism within the boundaries of Halacha.

The three stories discussed in this paper – "Panim Aherot" (1932), "Agunot"(1908) and "Vahaya HaAkov LeMishor"(1912) – all deal with the impact of secularism on the Jewish married couple. In "Panim Aherot" divorce is at the center; in "Agunot" arranged marriage is posed against the modern concept of falling in love; and "Vahaya HaAkov LeMishor" is concerned with the abandoned wife (Ha'Aguna). In all of these stories, the dissolution of marriage is caused due to the introduction of the new modern ideas of lust, love and sexuality into

traditional Jewish society. These three stories are among the most discussed stories by Agnon, yet reading them through a Halachic lens reveals new meanings that are valid even in today's post-secular Israel. Special attention is paid in this paper to the question of women who, in the literary battle between secularism and Halacha, still maintain the integrity of their love, their body and their honor. Agnon manages all of this by taking liberties that can be understood almost as a paradox: secularism within the boundaries of Halacha