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PREFACE FROM THE AGUNAH BY CHAIM GRADE

Dealing with the problem of the agunah ("deserted wife") has always been one of the most painful problems faced by the Jewish Beth-Din. Scholarly books are overflowing with responsa concerning women whose husbands died in pogroms, in war, or while away from home. Since the laws in this case are severe, the rabbis have been afraid to rule that a woman is free to remarry if she has not bought testimony sufficiently credible to prove that her husband is dead. A stricter rabbi could be--and usually was--as kind-hearted as a lenient rabbi who in fact permitted a certain agunah to marry another man. I myself have more than once witnessed the immense torment of the assembled scholars and their sympathy for a deserted wife when they had to rule on her fate. Descriptions of "good" and "bad" rabbis have always seemed to me naive (in an anti-traditionalist way) and artistically primitive.

In my opinion, yiddish literature in general has not presented a realistic reflection of rabbis deciding questions of Jewish law, though for generations they have been our only spiritual leaders. They have either been characterized in a completely negative way, under the general, pejorative, "clergy" label; or they have been described only in terms of externals (the beards, the kaftans and the gestures) but not separated into different types, as though following a formula that "all rabbis have one face"; or they have been removed from their bodies and appearances altogether in order to present them as symbols of good deeds or personifications of pure ideas; or they have become legendary heroes; or theatrical figures, decorative and pathetic.

I know of only a few exceptions in our literature when creative artists have described rabbis as real human beings, not too heavenly and not too crudely of this world. Since I spent my youth in the study house and in Lithuanian yeshivas, I came to know well scholars and their human temptations, their frame of mind and way of thinking, their social circumstances and family life, and the ones of great faith for whom the world to come was a tangible thing, often truer than the world of their daily lives. I also came to know the neighbors on our poor street and their relationships to the students in the house of study--sometimes full of courtesy and love, and sometimes at war with the students of the Torah and even with the Torah itself.

It is this relationship between study house and street, and the struggle between rabbis over a woman whose husband did not return from the First World War, which serves as the theme of the novel The Agunah, described against the background of the old, established Jewish way of life in Vilna.

The Author

(Translated by Michael Stern)