

OFFPRINT FROM

HEBREW STUDIES

**A Journal Devoted to
Hebrew Language and Literature**

Volume XLIX, 2008

**MARVIN A. SWEENEY, Editor
SMADAR SHIFFMAN, Associate Editor
PAMELA BARMASH and SHACHAR PINSKER
Book Review Editors**

**Published at the University of Wisconsin-Madison by
The National Association of Professors of Hebrew
in Institutions of Higher Learning
איגוד הפרופסורים לעברית באוניברסיטאות**

**REB GERSHON AND REB YUDL:
THOUGHTS ON THE ACHIEVEMENT OF GERSHON SHAKED
ON THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF HIS DEATH**

Alan Mintz
Jewish Theological Seminary

The late professor of Hebrew literature at the Hebrew University Gershon Shaked pointed to an essay he published in 1978 on S. Y. Agnon's novel *Hakhnasat kalah* as one of his best pieces of critical writing. As a tribute to Shaked, this article examines the scholarly qualities that the article exemplified. Shaked deployed theoretical tools taken from structuralism, genre theory, folklore studies, as well as his own concepts developed in his earlier work on Agnon in order to make sense of the difficult problems presented by the novel. The article further suggests an affinity between Reb Yudl, the protagonist of the novel, and Shaked himself.

For me, the World Congress of Jewish Studies of 1977 was memorable for several reasons. It was the first time the Congress was being held in the newly opened buildings of the Mount Scopus campus of the Hebrew University. It was also the first time that I, a young scholar and newcomer to the field of Hebrew literature, was delivering a paper in Hebrew. The Hebrew literature section of the Congress that year opened with a paper by the late David Patterson, the distinguished Oxford authority on the Haskalah, which was the only talk in that section given in English. Although I do not remember its subject, I do remember with a sense of comic irreality that Patterson introduced his English paper by saying, there in Jerusalem and without a whiff of ironic self-consciousness, that he thought it was important that Hebrew literature be discussed in a major language. But the most indelible memory from the Congress, aside from my enormous neophyte performance anxiety, was Gershon Shaked's paper on Agnon's *Hakhnasat kalah*. A performance like that I had never been witness to. Having grown up in English departments in America where the norm for public speaking was understated urbane wit or theoretical precision, I was wholly unprepared for the academic paper as total performance art, complete with extravagant gesticulations, booming declamations alternating with falsetto intimations, and fully aspirated emphases that could prove rather dangerous for listeners seated too close to the podium.

The theatrics of the occasion made it hard for me to attend to the content of Shaked's paper, whose brilliance, in any event, I was too new to the field to appreciate fully. But I did have an inkling that something important was

happening, because, when I had been visiting with Shaked a few days earlier, he was very excited about the approaching lecture and pointed to the typescript of the talk, saying that "in his humble opinion" [*le'aniyut da'ati*] the talk he was about to present at the Congress was the best work he was capable of. Now, at that time I was just becoming acquainted with Shaked's hyperbolic style, and I did not much know what to make of this claim of his, and I suppose that I felt the wariness that most of us feel when writers and artists label one of their works as their best effort. Yet looking back from the vantage point of these thirty years, during which I have learned something more about Agnon and Agnon criticism, I tend to agree with Shaked. As we approach his first *yahrzeit*, I thought it would be revealing to look at a discreet job of work that Shaked felt realized his full critical capacities and which he chose, I shall argue, because of a deep affinity with its central subject.

I say a discreet job of work because there is an obvious tension in Shaked's career between the aspiration to undertake large systemic projects and the desire to render a holistic interpretation of a single work of art. This is a tension in which the former, the *proyekt*, is privileged as the vocation of the true literary scholar, whereas the latter, mere *interpretatsiah*, is the guilty pleasure of the amateur who has not arrived at the level of true *mehqar sifruti*. I am referring not *only* to Shaked's monumental history of Hebrew fiction. Shaked's transactions with Agnon furnish a good example of this tension. His 1973 study *Omanut hasippur shel Agnon* is a large and ambitious attempt to describe the poetics of Agnon's fiction and to account for its artistic dimension in the face of a critical establishment that largely focused on the spiritual dilemmas dramatized in Agnon's stories. In this work, Shaked insisted on subordinating discussions of individual texts to their role as instantiations of the structural principles, such as *zimmun* and parallelism, that generated the fictional works. I admire the work very much, although I must admit to my own frustrations as a beginning teacher who wanted to riffle the book for a gloss on a particular story I had to teach the next day only to discover how steadfast Shaked had remained in his commitment to a systematic poetics.

When Shaked eventually allowed himself to undertake a serious reckoning with a single Agnon work, he did not shield himself from difficulty. If all of Agnon's novels can truly be said to be problem novels, then *Hakhnasat kalah* is arguably the most problematic of the lot. The meandering story of Reb Yudi's quest for a dowry for his daughters, at almost every turn, threatens to break down into an assemblage of interpolated tales. The

magical happy ending, which hinges upon the accidental discovery of a hidden treasure, makes a mockery of the achievements of the western novel post-*Tristram Shandy*. The figure of the protagonist himself is maddeningly equivocal: Reb Yudel is a holy fool who perpetrates a sustained identity hoax, and the reader does not know how to take him. Finally, there is the mountain of criticism that weighs upon the belated interpreter of this novel, which has been around for a long time. The opening section of the novel was first published in Berkovitch's *Miqlat* in New York in 1920, and the first full version of the work came out in 1931. *Hakhnasat kalah* is the debut novel of a writer who already in the 1920s occupied a privileged central position in the world of Hebrew letters, and everyone who was anyone had something to say about Agnon's novel.

So, in choosing *Hakhnasat kalah* for monographic treatment, as he did in 1978 in a long essay in the volume *Shai Agnon: meḥqarim ute'udot* that he edited with Rafi Weiser, Shaked was indeed, not to put too fine a point on it, biting off a great deal to chew on, and in the process, telling us something essential about himself. The title of the essay is "Hamamin hagadol: iyunim be-*Hakhnasat kalah*," and the very concept of being a *ma'amin gadol* is one that I wish to show applies as much to Shaked, *mutatis mutandi*, as it does to Reb Yudel, the novel's protagonist.

Before proceeding to outline the substance of Shaked's approach to novel, I wish for a moment to digress upon this last issue, the burden of past criticism, and to do so by contrasting the approaches of Shaked and Dan Miron on this score in their work on *Hakhnasat kalah*. In 1996 Miron published a 280-page essay, with no chapter headings, on *Hakhnasat kalah* titled *Histaklut beravnekher*. His method in this work is the same *via negativa* familiar from his long scholarly career. In order to reach his own interpretative conclusions, Miron engages and anatomizes all the major critical statements made on the novel, assessing the shortcomings of each one and occasionally finding wisdom among minor, often marginalized, opinions. The largest portion of scrutiny, some sixty rather savage pages, is meted out to Shaked's 1978 essay we are discussing here. Now, there are two fundamental ways to understand Miron's enterprise. Either you compare it to General Sherman's march through Georgia, in which the slashing and burning leaves only the victor's position unscathed; or you see it, as Miron himself does in a very peculiar afterword to this volume, as a dialectical method of arriving at truth by taking the contributions of predecessors very seriously and working through them rather than around them. That this method inevitably produces collateral damage is acknowledged by Miron in his after-

word, at the same time as he proclaims his deep respect for the opinions he engages. Because Shaked is the only major critic referred to who was alive at the time whom Miron takes on the body of the book, it is difficult not to see the afterword as a conflicted gesture toward his long-time colleague and antagonist.

Shaked's way of working is very different. It can be characterized as a kind of critical due diligence rather than polemical engagement. In the fifty-some footnotes that accompany the essay on *Hakhnasat kalah*, Shaked takes notice of the rich critical literature on the novel in a spare and laconic manner. When it comes to works that have contributed to his understanding of the novel, he simply says "*ayen*"; and when it comes to views that he takes as misguided, he simply says, "*hashveh*." His main goal in the essay is to lay out his own argument, and the only text he is genuinely interested in struggling with is the text of Agnon's novel. Is Shaked's disinclination to work through the arguments of his predecessors in order to foreground the originality of his own work better or worse than Miron's dialectical interrogation of the history of criticism? This is a question to be taken up at a different time and place. Yet before letting go of this digression, it is worth pointing out a curious reversal. When it came to conferences and public gatherings, it was Miron who would sit through the papers impassively, whereas Shaked would often be the one to undertake a polemical dressing down of the presenter, only to pick up the phone the next morning to offer *his* apology.

Now to return to Shaked's essay on *Hakhnasat kalah*. It is clear from the very outset that in Shaked's eyes *Hakhnasat kalah* is a masterwork that deserves a place in the canon of modern literature. This assumption is highly significant, because, instead of approaching the enormous difficulties of the novel with interpretive suspicion, ready to discover *aporiae* signaling insoluble contradictions, Shaked comports himself with critical humility before the aura of a great work, whose difficulties he takes as mysteries to be solved. (There is a core element of belief at work here that connects Shaked to Reb Yudel, as I hope to demonstrate shortly.) This stance before the work obligates Shaked to use all the tools in his critical armamentarium to wrestle with the novel's problems; and, indeed, the structure of his essay can be seen as a succession of theoretical approaches, each of which is applied to the cruxes of the novel and then not so much abandoned as superseded by the next.

The first of these is the structuralist technique of identifying a series of binary oppositions that generate the novel. There is the opposition, for example, between abstinence and gluttony. From a home life of bare subsis-

tence, Reb Yudl is offered many opportunities for gluttony once he is on the road, and he denies himself no good things when they are offered, only to slip back into self-abnegation when they are not. Other thematic oppositions include childlessness-sterility versus marriage-fecundity, poverty versus wealth, and exile versus redemption. There are formal (as opposed to thematic) binaries as well. Shaked identifies an ongoing opposition between the tissue of novelistic discourse per se and the imported quoted texts from Scripture and various classical sources. He finds a similar opposition between the ongoing narrative and the dozens of interpolated tales that stud the novel. Shaked is aware of the fact that his structuralist analysis, like most such exercises, does not take him as far as he would like to go, at least not always in the right direction. The binary oppositions call renewed attention to the residual presence of deep cleavages in the novel, even at the same time as they help us to organize these contradictions in illuminating ways.

Shaked next comes at the novel using a neo-Aristotelian or rhetoric-of-fiction approach that focuses on the credibility of the story as a "plausible narrative," a *sippur efshari*. *Hakhnasat kalah* gets underway as a travel-quest narrative that follows Reb Yudl's adventures in search of dowry funds for his daughters. Yet despite the abundance of realistically told incidents—and leaving aside for the moment all the interpolated tales—Shaked argues that the telling of the novel progressively detaches itself from the conventions of realism and in doing so subverts its epistemological status. Already from the midpoint of the novel, after Nyute has returned home to Brodie and spread the word of Reb Yudl's exploits, the hasid becomes the stuff of legend in the ballads of the Brodie Singers. And this is even before he is present at the home of Reb Yudl Nathanson, the wealthy man he has been impersonating, for a Purim spiel in which he himself is played, very persuasively, by one of the mummers. Playful inconsistencies in the voice of the narrator contribute to this sense of instability. Although the narrator largely tells the story after the fact based on the reports of others, there are times when he seems to be a direct witness to the action, saying "*sah lanu Reb Yudl*." At another point, during Yudl's prolonged stay in Buczacz, the narrator describes *himself* as a direct descendent, four generations removed, from one of the elders of Buczacz who figures in Yudl's visit. Moreover, at numerous points in the novel, Yudl's exploits are told in the rhymed prose of the *maqama*, a practice that further accelerates the transformation of his story into legend.

Having established this, Shaked next makes use of his knowledge of European folktale and genre theory, as well as some homemade tools de-

veloped in his previous critical work on Agnon. Shaked sees this sprawling novel as containing three essential plots: the quest plot, the comedy-of-errors plot, and the treasure plot, all of which exist in an unstable relationship to one another. It is only because of his disguise, which allows people to assume that he is the wealthy Reb Yudel Nathanson, that Reb Yudel Hasid is successful in his mission to find a husband for his daughter. Yet the successful conclusion of his quest must inevitably lead to the exposure of his true identity, as the comedy-of-errors plots threaten to precipitate a humiliating disaster. And although Yudel's fortunes are rescued by the discovery of the treasure, that discovery, which comes about because of a serendipitous and non-striving state of *heseḥ hada'at*, functions to subvert entirely the very idea of a quest and to question the status of *Hakhnasat kalah* as a legitimate example of the novel as we know it.

The coherence of the novel is challenged from another quarter by the dozens of interpolated tales, which Yudel is told at the various stopping places in his journeys. For some critics, the tales are a sign of Agnon's inability to transcend his native *métier* as a writer of stories. Yet for Shaked, who believes in the consummate artistry of this novel, the tales are a phenomenon to be explained, *ve'alav hare'ayah*. Shaked sets about taking on this challenge by using the proprietary concepts of narrative analogy and juxtaposition that he developed in his earlier study of the poetics of Agnon's fiction. He attempts to demonstrate how each tale is situated between a discussion that precedes and follows it, how the cycle of tales before Yudel secures a husband for his daughter at the midpoint of the novels differs from the cycle that comes after, how the themes of the tales both support and expand the central thematic axis of the novel, and, finally, how the tales function to delay and undercut the quest plot. I say that Shaked *attempts* to accomplish these goals because that is all he can do within the compass of an essay, and a fuller account of the yield of this approach awaits a more systematic analysis.

Yet after using the many formidable implements in his critical toolkit, Shaked has to admit that figure of Reb Yudel makes sense only if it is understood to be informed by a powerful extra-literary metaphysical force. Shaked concludes his essay by arguing against an ironic reading of Yudel's character; to his lights, Yudel is a comic holy fool whose glory lies precisely in the fact that he remains sublimely untouched by what he sees of the world on his journeys. He is the "Don Quixote of theodicy" in Shaked's zinger of a phrase, which remains memorable despite the problematic nature of the comparison to Cervantes. He is a *ma'amin gadol*—which is the title of

Shaked's essay—whose steadfastness richly warrants the marvelousness of the wedding feast at the novel's ending. As in the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, this feast subsumes within it the narrative's jarring contradictions and draws together and rewards all of the hosts and helpers who had extended hospitality to Reb Yudel during his wanderings. The very long *Shir ha'otiyot* (Song of the letters) offered by the Jerusalem scholar, which, though viewed as gratuitous by some critics, is seen by Shaked as an appropriate projection of a utopian vision of the values of learning, faith, and procreation at the heart of the novel. The poem ends with an act of settlement in Eretz Yisrael, which is presented as the ultimate fulfillment of the Jew's spiritual journey, which, in turn, is the path undertaken by Yudel and his wife Frummet in the final pages of the novel.

It is this final arrival that gives away my thesis, if it is not by now already perfectly obvious. Reb Yudel and Reb Gershon are both *ma'aminim gedolim*. There are evident, superficial affinities between the two: the availability for occasional gluttony, the perpetual curiosity about the stories of others, the perseverance in the face of adversity, the longing to sit and learn; and there are of course evident divergences. Yet what joins these unlikely suspects at a place of depth is the quality of *emunah*. If Yudel is the exemplar of faith in an age of faith, then Shaked is a believer in the destiny of the Jewish people and the Jewish state in an age battered by great losses and great challenges, which, in the end, have never made him swerve from his conviction *she'ein maqom aher*.