

The *Torah* Scroll as a Person and as the Sacred Source of Creation in Agnon's Narrative

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Abstract The *Sefer* (in many communities the *Torah* scroll is known only as the *Sefer*), the Book par excellence, has become not only the object that embodies the durability of the Jewish religious faith but also the place, the symbolic territory that has replaced the Temple and the real territory at a time when both have disappeared. In this article the *Sefer*, the quintessence of the Jewish identity, will be analyzed also as it is perceived in many Jewish communities and in literature as a person, as a human being, male or female, a human being that deserves to be treated as pure and sacred. A perception that has been very elaborated in an interesting tale of Agnon, *Haggadat ha sofer* (The legend of the scribe), a tale that will be considered here.

1

Maurice Halbwachs ([1950] 1968, p. 16) has already pointed out that a religious group needs to refer to an object, to an aspect of reality which is durable and not given to change as institutions and customs will alter and ideas will move on but the object will remain as it is. Hence objects acquire an especially important status because they are destined to stand the test of time.

We know that in Judaism, the *Sefer* (in many communities the *Torah* scroll is known only as the *Sefer*), the Book par excellence, has become not only the object that embodies the durability of the Jewish religious faith but also the place, the symbolic territory that has replaced the Temple and the real territory at a time when both have disappeared. Indeed the *Sefer* has turned into the «place» of Jewish identity par excellence. What I intend to argue in this article is that the *Sefer*, aside from being the quintessence of the Jewish identity, can also be perceived as a person, as a human being, male or female, a human being that deserves to be treated as pure and sacred. A perception that has found a form of literary representation in an interesting tale of Agnon *Haggadat ha sofer* (The Legend of the Scribe) ([1919] 1978).¹

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1 See also the translation (Agnon 2009).

In the *Talmud Bavli* it is written:² «Rava said: How stupid most people are to rise before a *Sefer Torah* but not before an important man», meaning that already in the Talmud era the *Sefer* was honoured like a person, by rising to one's feet, while scholars were not considered worthy enough of such an honour.³

What is more, the *Talmud Babli* contains a further passage allowing us to compare on the same footing the *Sefer* to a living person, where a person giving their last breath is likened to a Torah going up in flames.⁴

If ancient texts such as the *Talmud* lead us to perceive a symbolism in which the *Torah* can personify a human being, current traditions widely demonstrate how such an idea has been implemented in a number of practices. Many examples show how the scroll of parchment receives the same treatment as a human being, often a royal figure, and how the different parts which comprise it are considered vital.

We might mention that the *Torah* scroll consists of parchment rolled around two wooden poles, called *ets hayyim*, the tree of life, the living tree, something in any case to do with living. The scrolls must always be covered just as we cover a human being and are uncovered only at the moment of reading, the time of unveiling and revelation, when nudity becomes necessary. The poles are dressed in precious fabrics and often adorned with silver finery. They are kept in a wooden case that opens like a door. The case containing the poles is itself wound in cloth and is dressed and embellished with a crown on top, as if it were a head to be crowned. The crown is set with *rimonim*, pomegranates, the symbols of fertility placed on top of the wooden polls, the *ets hayyim*. In the Yemen, the mantle covering the *Torah* case is called *guftan*, (the *kaftan*, the traditional male garment). The removal of the *Sefer* from the *aron* is greeted by the women of the Sephardic community with palms held out towards the *Sefer* and this gesture is accompanied with celebratory *yu yu*.

2

Harvin Goldberg (2003, pp. 93-98) has dedicated a short chapter to *The «Torah» as a person*, describing the great emotional investment in the *Torah* made by the Jewish *sofrim* (scribes). He reminds us how in medieval Jewish mysticism the *Torah* was seen as a pretty, seductive young girl, hidden in a palace and ready to reveal herself to her suitor little by little, and how mysticism is not far removed from human experience. As

2 *Talmud Bavli, Makot, 2,2.*

3 My thanks to Nati Kupfer for this quotation.

4 BT *Moed qatan* 25 a (cit. in Goldberg 2003).

Goldberg writes: «I have heard both young children and adults compare the dressed *sefer Torah* to a human person. Some suggested male figures; others mentioned female, such as a bride or a queen» (Goldberg, p. 94). The *Sefer* therefore can also be considered as a girl, dressed up in a regal manner but also a child.

In Sephardic liturgy there is a *piyyut* which is read during *Shavuot* and called *ketubbah*, a marriage contract. Here reference is made to the marriage contract which God gave to his people on the day of *Shavuot*, the day when the gift of the *Torah* in the Sinai is celebrated. This is a further reference which returns to the concept of the *Torah* as a bride, a figure with which one can establish a relationship of mystical unity, noted in cabalistic thought as *Shekhinah*, the presence of God in the world.

In the novel *Agunot* (Abandoned women) (Agnon [1908] 1978) the *Torah* ark, work of a gifted craftsman is considered like a rival in love by Dina, the young girl who is attracted by the artist and finishes to push the ark out of the window into the garden moved by anger and jealousy.

Goldberg (2003, p. 95) also highlights the custom, present both in North Africa and in Eastern Europe, of childless couples buying a *Sefer Torah* to donate to a synagogue as a propitiatory gesture to foster offspring, a theme central to Agnon's tale. The donated *Sefer* carrying the name of the sterile couple would constitute a substitute for descendants, a presence which will last even when the couple is no longer with us, a sort of symbolic filiation having its own identity and guaranteeing the continuation of the spouses. Goldberg also mentions the custom of some communities to dance at the *Simhat Torah* celebration and hold in their hands both children and scrolls as if there was a correspondence between them as well as interchangeability. This is another motif we will find in Agnon's tale.

The custom of placing the *Torah* on the seat of Elijah during the ritual of circumcision has also been witnessed in certain Sephardic communities and in this case it is a matter of correspondence between the *Sefer* and the male child on the day of *milah* (circumcision).

When a scribe ordered a *Sefer* to be donated to a synagogue, it was kept, when completed, at the donor's house for some time until the right moment came for it to be conveyed to the synagogue. It was over this period that the case to transport it was built. When all was ready, a full male procession was organised. Singing and praying, they followed the route from the donor's house to the synagogue. During the procession the men took turns to carry the book while the women shouted their celebratory *yu yu*, exactly as occurs in the procession accompanying a young boy during the *bar mitzvah*.

In 2013 the Venice Ghetto experienced a festival atmosphere marking the 'birth of a *Sefer Torah*' and its resting in the synagogue, when it celebrated the conclusion of the writing of the scroll and therefore the birth of a *Sefer* during the month of *Adar*, with a celebration lunch, dancing and live music.

In Istanbul during the ritual of *Tisha be-av*, a ritual recalling mourning rites, the *Sefer* is placed on the seat and not on the table; in other words it is placed at a lower height, thus echoing the practice of other Jews who stoop to sit on the ground as a show of mourning.

Once the *Torah* is deposited in the synagogue's *aron*, it will leave its new home only to be buried in a cemetery when it has become no longer usable, exactly as happens with a human being. When the Jews from the south of Morocco left their small villages they made sure they buried in a cemetery the *Sefarim* that they could not take with them. It is as if the *Sefer* were subject to the main rites of passage which a Jew undergoes in life – those of birth, *bar mitzwah* (son of the commandments) and death.

3

In Agnon, the motif of reference to the *Sefer* or the *Sefarim* is constant, particularly in the tales, and the ways we find the *Sefarim* unadorned, old and worn or, on the contrary, new are often used as a metaphor of the narrator's state of mind or the socio-political situation. In *Oreah natah lalun* (A guest stopped to sleep) (Agnon [1939] 1976, p. 14) we read (my translation):

The *Sefer* in the hands of the officiant but also the one which the *maftir* (the last person called to read from the *Torah* during *Shabbat*) would read from had neither crown nor ornament. In fact the precious sacred vessels and the *Torah* embellishments in pure silver, the work of artists, had been requisitioned by the government during the war to make swords and spears and the *Torah* was left unadorned. The *ets hayyim* were sticking sadly out of the parchment and it was heart-breaking to see their faded colour.

In the tale *Im kenissat ha-yom* (At the Beginning of the Day of *Kippur*) (Agnon [1951] 1977; cf. Trevisan Semi 1995, pp. 33-41), the narrator gains relief from his misadventures only when, amidst the old *Sefarim*, he finds a new *Sefer* which he had tied with a strong cord so it could not fall and which he himself had written «for the elevation of the soul in days past»; it is enough for him to see this *Sefer* to feel pacified (Trevisan Semi 1995, p. 40).

Agnon's protagonists wrap themselves in the *tallet* used to wrap the *Sefer* like in *Pi-shnayim* (Double) as if the latter and the protagonist were interchangeable in the sense that both are covered in the same mantle (Agnon [1939] 1979; cf. Trevisan Semi 1995, pp. 9-27) while the *aron ha-qodesh* opens and closes like the door of a house to allow entry and exit to the *Sefarim* those who come to pay homage and greet the one whose turn it is to read (Trevisan Semi 1995, p. 10).

The *Sefer* can also present an opportunity to express concern when the practices surrounding the handling of the *Sefer* are not conducted correctly: «I saw that the *Sefer Torah* for the reading of *Yom ha kippurim* had been rolled back to front, the writing underneath and the parchment on top» (Agnon, [1939] 1979, p. 132) (my translation).

Let us see, however, how Agnon, in his long tale entitled *Haggadat ha-sofer*, expresses his own feelings towards the *Sefer*, as he gives free rein to all the ambiguity connected with this sacred object. The tale, written in 1919 and contained in the volume *Elu we-elu* (Agnon [1941] 1978) comprises eleven paragraphs. As Arnold J. Band (1968, pp. 109-113) points out, it returns to a theme which has already been dealt with in the two previous tales, *Toyt'n-tants* in Yiddish and *Be'era shel Miriam* of 1910, which both tell the story of a scribe who, after finishing writing a *sefer Torah* in memory of his dead wife, ends up performing a frenzied dance while holding in his arms both the *Sefer Torah* and the wedding dress.

4

The parallel drawn between between the wife and the *Sefer Torah* in the context of a dance of death will become even clearer in *Haggadat ha-sofer*. Here we learn of the hero of the story, the scribe Rafael, who is so immersed in the sacrality of the task of writing the scrolls and so taken up with the climate of piety and prayer that he is unable to love and have sexual relations with his wife. The two poles - love for the *Sefer Torah* and love for his wife - seem to lie in opposition to each other in the tale with no chance of compromise. It is what happens also in the novel *Agunot* where the young girl, Dina considers the *Torah* ark a rival to her love for the artist, the creator of the ark. It is the irreconcilability between the two poles which gives rise to the couple's infertility since they are unable to have children. Although it is not made explicit in the tale, the sterility making up the *leitmotif* of the narration is due to the lack of sexual relations between the couple. Irony would have it that he writes the scrolls specifically for infertile couples or those widowed (my translation):

Every well-off Jew who had no children, may God the Merciful protect us, or who had been left a widow, may God the Merciful protect us, went to the scribe and said: You know, Rabbi Rafael, my brother, you know how we are and what our lives are like. I had so greatly hoped that my children and my children's children would come to you and that you would write their phylacteries but alas no, I have no descendents... (Agnon 1978, p. 131)

and Rafael the scribe would sit and write a *Torah* scroll so as to leave them

a name and a memory among the children of Israel. In this way the scrolls carrying the name of the donor would replace the child and descendency, becoming a surrogate child (Band, p. 110).

The tale recounts how greatly Miriam desires pregnancy, of the clothes she makes for orphans and the objects she keeps, such as the willow branch from the *Hoshana Rabba* celebration (during which the scrolls are removed from the *aron* and carried in procession) which when placed in water was known to save women during pregnancy or else an amulet to ward off sterility (my translation):

Miriam had threaded the amulet with seven threads of seven veils of seven women who had witnessed their own children and their children's children and none of them had died before their parents. (Agnon 1978, p. 135)

Yet none of these propitiatory rites will have any effect if Rafael cannot have sexual relations with his wife. In a very fine passage the polarisation present in the tale returns. Miriam makes herself attractive to seduce her husband but then she sees the mirror hanging on the wall that reflects on the opposite wall the hanging *mizrah* (written text which indicates the direction that Jews in the Diaspora face during prayer) indicating the direction of Jerusalem and the prayer and this is a sign of the irreconcilability between the pole of love and that of the sacrality and purity which are vital for the writing of the roll (my translation):

So she decides to make herself attractive for her husband but now reflected in the mirror appears the *mizrah* with its images and the two open-mouthed lions. Miriam recoils. (Agnon 1978, p. 137)

In fact when Rafael comes back from prayer and sees his wife in all her beauty in front of the mirror, he goes towards her (my translation):

As soon he is standing next to her, there glitters His name, blessed be He, as a reflection in the mirror. Rafael stops and in holy devotion reads «I have set the Lord always before all else» and closes his eyes before the glory of his Name and for fear of Him. They separate in silence. (Agnon 1978, p. 137)

When Miriam, having lost all hope of getting pregnant, finally asks him to write a Torah scroll for them as well, Rafael refuses, stating that there was still hope. Miriam begins then to make up a mantle for the scroll, as Agnon writes, «like a woman whose hands are busy sewing swaddling clothes, miniature sheets and clothes for the baby» (Agnon 1978, p. 138), again making explicit the equivalence of scroll and child, whose birth requires

a baby's things. However Miriam, unable to bear the situation, dies in her prime. After her death, Rafael, who is compared to a gardener, begins to write a scroll for her (my translation):

What can we liken him to? To an expert gardener growing splendid plants in his garden...Rafael was an expert gardener who planted splendid Torah scrolls in the world. (Agnon 1978, p. 139)

When he had finished the task «He wrapped up the scroll, raised it up high, dancing in great joy, and waltzed and sang in honour of the *Torah*» (Agnon 1978, p. 142). While he danced he was amazed at the melody which he had suddenly recalled and which reminded him of another melody he had heard as a child on the evening of *Simhat Torah*, the celebration to remember the end of the *Torah* reading. His memories took him back to the eve of the celebration, to the moment when the *hassidim* carried in their arms the sacred scrolls, dancing in great excitement while the children ran towards them, grasping the scrolls, clasping and embracing the dancers in an atmosphere of general elation. At the seventh round, when the cantor had seized the scroll and placed it on his lap, inviting the children to come and take it, Rafael himself headed towards the scroll. At that very same time, however, a little girl (his future wife, Myriam) who had thrown herself upon the scroll, smothering it with kisses and grasping it in her hands, had tipped a candle onto Rafael's clothing, causing it to catch fire. Here the author introduced a tale of childhood which had sunk into oblivion to lead us to the final scene, the climax of the tale.

Having narrated Rafael's bathing in the freezing river to purify himself before his completing the writing of the *Sefer* and being struck down with fever, Agnon writes the final scene which has Rafael delirious as he recalls Miriam's wedding dress and catches sight of the little bag of dust from the Land of Israel used in her burial. Rafael is seen wrapped in his *tallet*, holding in his arms the *Torah* scroll covered in precious silk cloth embroidered with the name of Miriam. In this story of love and death, of purity and impurity, of sacred and profane where there is no room for compromise, the tale cannot end but in drama (my translation): «A light enveloped the head of Rafael, the scribe who had collapsed to the ground with his scroll. And the wedding dress of his wife covers them both» (Agnon 1978, p. 145). Wedding veils and dresses, together with little bags of dust for burial, are the ingredients of a story in which a love too pure and sacred turned out to become mortal and barren, while the *Sefer Torah* replaces a child which can never be born precisely because of the excess of sacredness of the *Sefer Torah*. A sacred fire in the form of an omen, already presenting itself in childhood and introducing feelings of disquiet and anguish into the narration, prevents the couple from consuming their love, placing in opposition *Sefer/sacredness/purity* and *marital love/profane/impurity*. However

the *Sefer*, and also the contenitor of the ark as we have seen, can also take on female images and be considered as a metaphor for the divine presence in female form, the *Shekhinah*, the wife and princess of the cabalistic texts but also of literary writings. This tale could therefore also be read as a story setting two loves and two brides in contrast, and the difficulty in choosing the purest bride, a different take on the classic love triangle.

5

Band speaks of the presence in this tale of a romantic triad composed of love, creativity/holiness and death, which allegedly obsessed the writer from his childhood. In my opinion, there is indeed a triad but not between love, creativity/holiness and death, but rather between a mystic/sacred love, a profane love and the narrator/creator facing the fear of hybridity. The risk, but also the fascination, of hybridity, of mixing two genres, of facing modernity and tradition and the feelings of guilt associated with this fascination, as hybridity is strongly stigmatized in Judaism, is attested in the whole narrative work of Agnon as well as his wish to keep purity in the narrative, purity in the tradition, purity in the genealogy. This conflict is resolved in the story in favour of purity and sacredness with an added note of ambiguity represented by the fact that the writer dedicated this tale to his own wife, a dedication which we are tempted to interpret, as if the author is staking a claim to his main role as creator of *Sefarim*, of stories, in other words his role as a writer rather than a begetter of offspring. Hence it seems that we are in the presence of a literary model representing the *Sefer*, the book of Jewish tradition and Jewish identity par excellence as a sacred and pure bride, a source of creation and fertility that can not compromise with the secular world and who demands absolute devotion. In other words we stand before the role of writing as sacred and of the sacredness of the Jewish writer, a role that Agnon has very well embodied in becoming the sacred father recognized by the generations of writers that have followed him.

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