Iterary alchemist, transforming the raw stuff of folklore to shimmering literary nuggets. In his short story, "That Tzaddik's Etrog," we have a clear example of his artistic magic. He uses sleight of pen to give us the literary equivalent of an M.C. Escher drawing. At first we see only the white angels, but then the black devils formed by the interstices come to the fore and impinge on our perception. Which is the real Rebbe Mikheleh - tzaddik or scoundre!?

THE STORY BEGINS with a puzzling introduction, which seems to be just so much superfluous dross. Another apparently unnecessary paragraph is tacked on to the end. Both segments could be omitted without changing the essence of the story one whit. But those "extraneous" opening and closing lines which frame the story, are components of Agnon's wit. He must convince us that his version is, indeed, the true

quire an etrog by selfless sacrifice of a precious possession, not stooping to nickel-and-dime the seller over the change. His most impressive characteristic is complete self-control over himself when his "unspiritual" wife ruins his etrog because a broken pitam (stem or protuberance) invalidates an etrog, rendering it unfit for ceremonial use. Reb Mikheleh could well serve as a role model, symbol of that rare contempory man of utmost self-discipline who resists the materialistic and hedonistic pressures of his environment.

Perhaps that is why Rabbi Baruch counsels us in the very last line, "This is a story worth hearing twice." Heeding that advice, let's hear it a second time.

THE SECOND TIME AROUND, we begin to see some of the black emerging from the interstices between the lines: Reb Mikheleh may not be such a righteous man after all. The key to understanding that Agnon may really be painting a highly

etrog at the climax. In Agnon's critical portrait of the couple, Reb Mikheleh comes off second best to his wife's innate and quiet forbearance.

Another technique up Agnon's sleeve is the use of an idiom associated with a certain object in order to transfer the latter's qualities to a different object. He describes the etrog as

"a feast for the eyes and truly fit for the benediction."

This is almost exactly how Genesis [3:6] describes the first problematic fruit which had such a disastrous spinoff in the Garden of Eden:

"... the woman saw ... it was a feast for the eyes and truly fit to make one wise."

In fact, midrash suggests Eve's forbidden fruit was an etrog. But for Agnon,

#### b) Hidur mitzvah

Tradition definitely encourages enhancement of mitzvot. This principle is based, surprisingly, on the halakhic decision that circumcision be done as aesthetically as possible, even at the expense of certain Sabbath infringements. A beautiful etrog is one of the objects singled out by the Talmud for aesthetic enhancement (along with tallit, shofar, and Torah scroll). But an upper limit for enhancement is indicated as well, "For the sake of hidur one should spend as much as a third more than the cost of the mitzvah." It seems the tzaddik went overboard according to this criterion as well.

#### c) Family support

Although it seems superfluous to legally legislate a man's responsibility to support his family, halakha recognizes that this is not a self-evident principle and prescribes minimal levels. The case of Reb Mikheleh, along with the thousands of contempory child-support cases in courts, testifies to the need for such legislation, halakhic or civic.



# AGNON'S ETROG:

# TRANSMUTING LITERATURE FROM FOLKLORE

By Esther Azuiay and Shira Leibowitz

version of a tale we have heard elsewhere. He establishes his credibility in two ways: he name drops, and he trots out an eye-witness.

programmed in the company of the con-

The name dropping reads almost like the opening paragraph of an article in a chemistry journal, where an author cites, and omits, names which serve to establish his credentials with the reader and to add to the aura of veracity. With the aid of good references, Agnon wishes to create an unassailable claim to the truth of this story; afterall his version is from Reb Shlomo of Zvihel, a descendant of Reb Mikheleh of Zloczow (pronounced zlow'-chow). To erase any lingering doubt he drops two more references at the end of the story, Rabbis Yosef of Yampol and Baruch of Mezbizh.

Furthermore, he boasts an eye-witness: the daughter-in-law of the holy preacher himself. Agnon goes to great lengths to establish his claim of veracity, because he is not neutrally retelling a well-known tale, but creating his own radically ironic version, drawn in Escheresque now-white/now-black ambiguity.

critical portrait is in his clever use of a phrase from Proverbs, which he excises from its context (kindness to animals, Proverbs 12:10) and flips over for added irony. The first time the tzaddik's wife comes on stage, she is described as a woman who "understood the soul of her righteous husband." Agnon banks on the reader's hearing the reverberations from the book of Proverbs. When the description of the Rebbetzin is juxtaposed to the original Proverb, the full irony becomes obvious.

Proverbs: Yodeah tzaddik Nefesh behemto Agnon: Yoddaat Nefesh baalah (ishto shel oto tzaddik

Proverbs: A tzaddik understands the soul of his beast.

the soul of his beast.

Agnon: The wife of that traddik understands
the soul of her ... husband.

One can hear Agnon chuckling to himself as he slips this verse-play into the story, transforming the Rebbetzin into the real tzaddik and making "that tzaddik" ... beastly.

She is, indeed, saintly: while he secludes himself in his solitude room, she

again plucking a verse out of context, it is the man who is seduced by the goodly fruit.

ANOTHER UNDERCURRENT of irony is created in the unstated conflict between personal piety and codified law. The hero seems to be impelled by his obsession with obtaining a perfect etrog, not pausing to ask what would be the halakhically correct decision at each point in the plot. There are at least four areas of halakha which impinge upon the story.

d) Rejoicing

halakhic or civic.

mulation dictates that:

Reb Mikheleh's quest is rationalized at one point with a quote about Succot from Leviticus (23:40), "You shall take a fruit

uties to the need for such legislation,

of the beautiful tree [etrog] ... and rejoice...". But the format that rejoicing must take is not left to our whim. The hero knew full well that halakha, in its wonder-

ful specificity, delineates the concept of festival rejoicing. The Maimonidean for-

"the festivity...include the appropriate rejoicing of each man and his children and the members of his household. The children, for example, should be given parched grain, nuts, and sweetmeats; the womenfolk should be presented with pretty clothes and trinkets according to one's means; the menfolk should

eat meat and drink wine."

By contrasting Agnon's work with this sampling of folk-versions, we discern clearly the role reversal he has shrewdly performed, turning the shrew into a saint and the tzaddik into an obsessive egoist.

## a) Allocation of scarce resources

Halakha defines not only minimal standards, but operational priorities in situations demanding choices

In the light of this standard, the tzaddik's behavior is capricious. The Succot harvest demands a sober, carefully

delimited rejoicing.

version of a tale we have heard elsewhere. He establishes his credibility in two ways: he name drops, and he trots out an eye-witness.

was are a religious of

John Louis Standar

The name dropping reads almost like the opening paragraph of an article in a chemistry journal, where an author cites, and omits, names which serve to establish his credentials with the reader and to add to the aura of veracity. With the aid of good references, Agnon wishes to create an unassailable claim to the truth of this story; afterall his version is from Reb Shlomo of Zvihel, a descendant of Reb Mikheleh of Zloczow (pronounced zlow'-chow). To erase any lingering doubt he drops two more references at the end of the story, Rabbis Yosef of Yampol and Baruch of Mezbizh.

Furthermore, he boasts an eye-witness: the daughter-in-law of the holy preacher himself. Agnon goes to great lengths to establish his claim of veracity, because he is not neutrally reteiling a well-known tale, but creating his own radically ironic version, drawn in Escheresque now-white/now-black ambiguity.

ON FIRST READING, we meet Reb Mikheleh in his white purity. He is a tzaddik who, despite his own impoverishment and bare cupboards, sequesters a loaf of bread to save beggars from humiliation, should they knock at his otherwise empty home. He is not only immersed in good deeds, but in prayer and study as he concentrates in his solitude room. Disdainful of materialistic concerns, he rises above his own bodily needs, worrying only about the needs of the Divine. Nevertheless, he can act with alacrity when there is a precept to fulfill. He dashes to the etrog-seller and exudes joy when he is finally able to ac-

critical portrait is in his clever use of a phrase from Proverbs, which he excises from its context (kindness to animals, Proverbs 12:10) and flips over for added irony. The first time the tzaddik's wife comes on stage, she is described as a woman who "understood the soul of her righteous husband." Agnon banks on the reader's hearing the reverberations from the book of Proverbs. When the description of the Rebbetzin is juxtaposed to the original Proverb, the full irony becomes obvious.

Proverbs: Yodeah tzaddik Nefesh behemto Agnon: Yoadaat Nefesh baalah (ishto shel oto tzaddik

Proverbs: A traddik understands
the soul of his beast.

Agnon: The wife of that traddik understands
the soul of her ... hurband.

One can hear Agnon chuckling to himself as he slips this verse-play into the story, transforming the Rebbetzin into the real tzaddik and making "that tzaddik" ... beastly.

She is, indeed, saintly: while he secludes himself in his solitude room, she frees him from family burdens, is logical and practical. These sterling qualities cam her the rebuke, "You are worried about meat and fish, and I am worried about notyet having my etrog." Despite his reproach, and his jarringly egotistical "my etrog." she patiently exits. With her lips, she kisses the mezuzah and swallows her disappointment. She doesn't repeat to herself, as he does at the end of the story, "But I will not be angry. But I will not be angry." She simply is not angry, although she would be justified to be enraged. In contrast, we can imagine him gritting his teeth to control his fury when he is devastated by the ruined

again plucking a verse out of context, it is the man who is seduced by the goodly fruit.

ANOTHER UNDERCURRENT of irony is created in the unstated conflict between personal piety and codified law. The hero seems to be impelled by his obsession with obtaining a perfect etrog, not pausing to ask what would be the halakhically correct decision at each point in the plot. There are at least four areas of halakha which impinge upon the story.

ful specificity, delineates the concept of festival rejoicing. The Maimonidean formulation dictates that:

"the festivity...include the appropriate rejoicing of each man and his children and the members of his household. The children, for example, should be given parched grain, nuts, and sweetmeats; the womenfolk should be presented with pretty clothes and trinkets according to one's means; the menfolk should eat meat and drink wine."

By contrasting Agnon's work with this sampling of folk-versions, we discern clearly the role reversal he has shrewdly performed, turning the shrew into a saint and the tzaddik into an obsessive egoist.

#### a) Allocation of scarce resources

Halakha defines not only minimal standards, but operational priorities in situations demanding choices.

"If a [poor] person must choose between Sabbath lights and Chanukah lights ... the lighting of his home (by Sabbath candles) takes priority, so as to sustain peace in the house."

When mitzvot have to square-off, there are guidelines. Etrog vs. tefillin? Tefillin. Etrog vs. holiday meals? Holiday meals. Given Reb Mikheleh's predicament, not just our gut reaction, but halakha itself would come down on the side of the Rebbetzin.

In the light of this standard, the tzaddik's behavior is capricious. The Succot harvest demands a sober, carefully delimited rejoicing.

Thus, even by the yardstick of the tzaddik's own halakhic tradition, he was guilty on several counts. It's not his last line that makes us dislike him, "But I will not be angry." If only he had added at this point "... and my children are hungry. But I will not be angry." However, he doesn't. All he cares about his is self-control.

Agnon critics have read additional perspectives into this short story. Rivka Gurfein sees Agnon-the-philosopher at work here, in a parable where a "fine line separates holiness from impurity, mitzvah from sin," and which reminds us of the

(continued on page 15)

### AGNON'S ETROG ...

(continued from page13)

angel/devil motif in the Escher woodcut. Zvi Massad sees Agnon-the-moralist here, presenting Mikheleh as the paragon of selfrestraint and endurance. But only by comparing Agnon's miniature masterpiece to the raw material, can we tease out his probable intentions.

ELSEWHERE we have heard this story, at least so Agnon insists. "You heard the story from whomever you may have heard it." The very title indicates that he assumes the reader is familiar with the tale, "That tzaddik's etrog" i.e., the same tzaddik we know from some other recounting we have heard. It is the impassioned conviction of the teller that his version is right and those told by others, wrong. There is an inner tension within one and the same person, of knowing that he is right and knowing that this conviction has to be proven to others' satisfaction, in this case through the references and eye-witness in the first and last paragraphs, respectively, who could vouch that this is the "very stuff of the original ... not adding a word ... except for clarification."

A comparison of Agnon's story with several renditions of the folktale reveals the differences between great literature and folklore. The three accounts below (there are others) all belong to the genre of Chasidic tales which impart moral-ethical teachings. In this case, all three emphasize, through their differing endings, the great and rare virtue of not succumbing to wrath, epitomized in the hero's self-control at the end. Note; too, the unequivocal portrayal of the hero in these three versions as a role model to emulate.

One version appears in a Chasidic Anthology, where the tales are arranged according to alphabetized topics. The first of a dozen tales under the heading "Anger" is the story of a wealthy Jew who lent his thousand-zloty etrog to a neighbor who

fore took back the spoiled etrog without a word or reproach and in complete calmness of spirit."

This is the most artless of the folk versions. It is difficult to feel very sorry for the wealthy owner, who can probably replace his prize etrog with another one.

In a second version, Rabbi E. Kitov presents the story in the chapter on Succot in his book on holidays. Here the wife is an active etrog despoiler, while the tzaddik remains a tzaddik to be emulated.

"An impoverished tzaddik ... sold a precious pair of inherited tefillin ... and bought a beautiful etrog ... His wife felt intense anguish which turned to anger against her husband. She threw the etrog to the ground, ... whereupon the tzaddik said: 'Tefillin I have sold, the ctrog I have lost, should I also fall into the pit of anger?"

Rabbi Kitov's purpose is to exemplify the principle that "intention in performance of a mitzvah is proper if it does not lead to anger."

The most vicious ending appears in a recension where the wife is positively villainous. Rabbi Shlomo Zevin retells it in his holiday anthology. Reb Mikhel of Zloczow inherited a set of valuable tefillin. He had turned down an offer of 50 reinish for them; despite his destitution he wouldn't hear of selling. His wife nagged him to sell them, since he had an ordinary spare set he used for prayer,

"Once on Succot eve there was no etrog to be found in all of Zloczow. At the last minute someone brought a perfect etrog to town for sale for 50 reinish. R. Mikhel rushed to sell his father's tefillin, and bought the etrog. When his wife learned of this, she was furious and bombarded her husband with curses and insults: 'How dare you? How many times have I implored you to sell the tefil-

be He desires that my etrog be spoilt, I accept this with love.' Later, his father appeared to him in a dream, saying approvingly that Mikhel's forbearance made an even greater impression in Heaven, than did the initial act of piety in purchasing an etrog at a great financial sacrifice."

This ending sharpens both the Rebbetzin's shrewness and R. Mikhel's saintliness. She is the ultimate klafta, he the paragon of endurance.

By contrasting Agnon's work with this sampling of folk-versions, we discern clearly the role reversal he has shrewdly performed, turning the shrew into a saint and the tzaddik into an obsessive egoist. Agnon's conceit is that, while the reader may be familiar with the folktale in one of the above formats, only Agnon's Rebbetzin and Rebbe are the real McCoys.

A comparison of Agnon's story with several renditions of the folktale reveals the differences between great literature and folklore.

WHILE AGNON is busy turning legend into literature, he is not too busy to take a stand on a socio-historic controversy as well. A.A. Rivlin has noted that the appearance of historical Chasidic leaders in the final paragraph is not irrelevant to the plot. The casual reader may stop following the story when the action ends with the tzaddik's last words and just skim the final paragraph considering it a list of Chasidic rabbis arbitrarily mentioned for no ostensible reason. Agnon was rarely arbitrary.

One end of the Chasidic spectrum in

cession to sloth; never bent down to his food, for this would have been yielding to greed; and never scratched himself, since this would have verged on voluptuousness." Opening the chapter he devotes to R. Mikhel, Buber retells a vignette about this Rebbe's happiness despite (or because of) his poverty. "Someone challenged Reb Mikhel, who lacked so much, about how he could say the morning blessing. 'Blessed be Thou ... who has supplied my every need.' R. Mikhel responded, "My need is for poverty, and that is what I have been supplied with." This same Weltanschauung is echoed in the Agnon story when the tzaddik says, upon acquiring his etrog (while his home is still bereft of food), "Praised be the Blessed and Sublime Name for ... fulfilling my every need."

At the other extreme is Rabbi Baruch of Mezbizh (died 1811), described by Buber as a man of wealth, power, pride, and splendor. Even if this is somewhat exaggerated, he did represent a view opposed to R. Mikhel's asceticism.

THUS it is no accident that Agnon brings R. Baruch on stage at the end to request a retelling of the story lest we, on first hearing, mistake Reb Mikheleh for an unqualified tzaddik. Agnon, perhaps speaking through the Rabbi of Mezbizh, saves the last word not for R. Mikheleh. but for Rabbi Baruch, "This is a story worth hearing twice." Should we hear it to learn? how to be, or how not to be? That is the question.

NOTES:

1. S.Y. Agnon, "That Tzaddik's Etrog," translated from the Hebrew by Shira Leibowitz and Moshe Kohn, with permission from Schocken Publ. House, Tel Aviv. The Translation appeared in the Jerusalem Post Weekend Magazine, Oct. 5 1990. The original appeared in the collection Ha'esh Veha'etzim, Schocken, Tel Aviv, 1966.

2. M.C. Escher, "Circle Limit IV (Heaven and Hell)." Angel/devil motif on woodcut printed from 2 blocks. In The Graphic Work of M.C. Escher, by M.C. Escher, trans. J. Brigham, Ballantine, New York,

3. Maimonides, Laws of Chamkah, end of Ch.4. In P. Birnbaum, Malmonides' Mishaeh Torah, Hebrew

111 - 11 - 17 - 1 1006 m 111

end. Note, too, the unequivocal portrayal of the hero in these three versions as a role model to emulate.

One version appears in a Chasidic Anthology, where the tales are arranged according to alphabetized topics. The first of a dozen tales under the heading "Anger" is the story of a wealthy Jew who lent his thousand-zloty etrog to a neighbor who dropped and damaged it.

"The wealthy man bethought himself of the large sum he had spent on the etrog ... He reminded himself however, that should he feel anger against the borrower ... this would be displeasing to the Lord. He therea perfect etrog to town for sale for 50 reinish, R. Mikhel rushed to sell his father's tefillin, and bought the etrog. When his wife learned of this, she was furious and bombarded her husband with curses and insults: 'How dare you? How many times have I implored you to sell the tefillin for household necessities, and you refused? And now ... 'She worked herself into a rage finally grabbing the etrog from the table. She bit the stem off with her teeth, and spit it to the ground, R. Mikhel watched, not uttering a word of

reproach. 'If the Holy One Blessed

the final paragraph is not irrelevant to the plot. The casual reader may stop following the story when the action ends with the tzaddik's last words and just skim the final paragraph considering it a list of Chasidic rabbis arbitrarily mentioned for no ostensible reason. Agnon was rarely arbitrary.

One end of the Chasidic spectrum in Galicia was represented by R. Yehiel Mikhel (died about 1786), a dour ascetic. Buber describes him as one who remained pure and didn't understand the temptations of men. "According to a report which all but crosses the border between the sublime and the ridiculous, he never warmed himself at the stove, for this would have been a con-

Post Weekend Magazine, Oct. 5 1990. The original appeared in the collection Ha'esh Veha'etzim. Schocken, Tel Aviv, 1966.

2. M.C. Escher, "Circle Limit IV (Heaven and Hell)." Angel/devil motif on woodcut printed from 2 blocks. In The Graphic Work of M.C. Racher, by M.C. Escher, trans. J. Brigham, Ballantine, New York,

3. Maimonides, Laws of Chamkah, end of Ch.4. In P. Bimbaum, Malmonides' Mishneh Torah, Hebrew Publ. co. New York, 1985, p.111.

4. Talmud Shabbat, 133b. "Have a beautiful Succa in [God's] honor, a beautiful lulay and etrog, a beautiful shofar, a beautiful tallit, a beautiful scroll of law ... and wrap it with beautiful silks."

5. Talmud Baba Kama, 9b.

6. Mishnah Ketubot, Chapter 5.

7. Maimonides, Laws of Festivals 6:18. In P. Birnbaum, Malmonides' Mishneh Torah, ibid., p

8. One could contrast the halakhic ideal of restrained rejoicing following a harvest with other depictions, e.g., Bruegel's painting of The Harvesters, Reymont's description of frivolity in his Nobel-prize wirming novel Summer; or Vivaldi's musical depiction of the peasant dance of the autumn harvest in his Four

Seasons. 9. Rivka Gurfein, The Episode of the Etrog, Dvar Hapoelet, Sept. 1971.

10. Zvi Massad, Two Etrogim of S.Y. Agnon, Haaretz, March 12, 1971.

11. Louis Newman, Chasidic Anthology, Schocken, New York, 1963, p.7.

12. Eliyahu Kitov, The Book of Our Heritage, Feldheim, Jerusalem, p.174.

13. Shmuel Yosef Zevin, Chasidic Stories: Festivals,

Jerusalem, p.115. 14. A.A. Rivlin, Didactic Key for Teaching a Short

Story, Dept. of Pedagogy, Tel Aviv University, 1969. 15. Martin Buber, Tales of the Chasidim, Yehiel Mikhel of Zloczow, Schocken, Jerusalem, p.138. For descriptions of Yehiel Mikhel and Baruch of Mezhizh see the Introduction, pages 20 and 33.

Esther Azulay loves and teaches Hebrew literature in the Amit Religious High School, Beer Sheva, Israel. She also writes educational programs for the Ministry of Education. Shira Leibowitz teaches English as a Foreign Language in Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and is currently writing a series of essays on science and Jewish tradition.

Harris Z. Tilevitz Publisher/Editor

Shimon Hecht Rabbinical Consultant Rebecca D. Moshief Art Editor

Miriam Biber, Nechamah Reisel, Orrin E. Tilevitz Joseph H. Udelson

Contributing Editors

Design and Layout by Tom Cicero



# REVIEW JEWISH.

The Jewish Review (ISSN 1057-073X) is published bi-monthly by Jewish Review, Inc., a non-profit corporation. © 1991. Subscription rates are \$15 for six issues and \$25 for twelve issues. Outside the US add \$15 per year for airmail. Principal editorial offices are located in Park Slope, Brooklyn. All correspondence should be addressed to: P.O. Box 172, Brooklyn, NY 11215.

Editorial Offices and Display Advertising: (718) 499-0899

# Agnon's Etrog: Transmuting Literature from Folklore

By Esther Azulay & Shira Leibowitz

Sept. - Oct., 1991 . . . Tishrel - Cheshvan, 5752

Page 13