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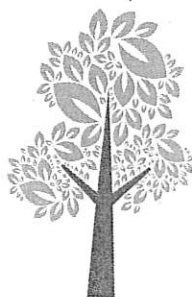
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I GAVE THIS SERMON on the Friday night of our son
Aaron's Bar Mitzvah Shabbat. Aaron suffered
from a rare and incurable disease. At age thirteen,
he was already very sick and frail, but bright and
courageous. He did wonderfully at the
Bar Mitzvah service but died less than a year
later. Decades after his death, his friends and
classmates continue to be inspired by his courage.
I think you will understand why I chose this story
as the basis for my sermon that Shabbat.



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THE KERCHIEF

3 December 1976

The Israeli author, Shai Agnon, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966 for, in the words of the Committee, "capturing the spirit of the Jewish people in his writings." He was born in Eastern Europe in a small town in Poland in 1888, and died in Jerusalem in 1970, four years after coming to international fame. Given when and where Agnon lived and died, it was perhaps inevitable that he would capture the spirit of the Jewish people, their transition from the Old World to the New, in his own biography and in his writings, and, more than any other modern author, would put the emphasis on what the Jewish people lost in the process.

I would speak tonight about one of my favorite Agnon stories, *Hamitpahat*, The Kerchief. In the story, the narrator looks back upon his boyhood, his years of growing up. He remembers how his father would have to travel to the big city of Lashkovitz, to a fair, which all the merchants from the area had to attend. It was very dangerous and a very lonesome time for the boy and his mother to be left alone.

In the opening lines of the story, he describes the days when his father was away as days of mourning, like Tisha Ba'av, and the day he returned as being a Yom Tov, a festival. Meanwhile, the boy is going to school, and one of the things he is learning is the legend of the Messiah, how the Messiah sits every day in the gates of Rome, unrecognized and abused, disguised as a beggar. But one day he will stand up and reveal his true identity and redeem the world. He will remove all evil and suffering from it. And the boy, seeing the

world through his own young eyes, dreams of this Messianic Age, a world without evil and without suffering. How does he picture it? He pictures it as a world in which his father will no longer have to go off to the fair, but will be able to stay home and be with him, and, together, they will stroll in the courtyards of a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem.

One day, his father comes back from the fair bringing presents for the family, and for the boy's mother he brings a beautiful kerchief. It's the eve of the Sabbath and she puts it on to light the candles. From that time on, she wears it only on Shabbat and Yom Tov. As the boy remembers it, the kerchief always remained immaculately clean. His mother never permitted a stain or a drop of dirt to come upon it. As the boy grows up and becomes Bar Mitzvah, his mother gives him the kerchief, puts it around his neck on the Sabbath of his Bar Mitzvah, and urges him to take care of it.

One day, shortly after that, a beggar comes to their town, an ugly, unkempt, disheveled-looking beggar. Everyone shuns him. Nobody gives him food. Nobody gives him money. They won't even let him into the synagogue to pray with them. The boy sees this beggar sitting forlorn on the steps of the synagogue where he was not permitted to enter. He goes over to the beggar, impulsively takes the kerchief from around his neck, and gives it to the beggar. The beggar uses it to wrap up the bleeding sores on his feet. When the boy realizes what he has done, he feels guilty. This, after all, was his mother's kerchief, which she always kept so immaculately clean, never permitted a spot of dirt to come upon, and here he has given it to this beggar to wrap his bleeding feet in. But he feels guilty only for a moment, for the sun comes out and shines on him and warms him, and that makes him feel better. He returns home, and his mother somehow knows what he has done. She is looking out through the window, smiling approvingly at him, and he feels reassured.

That's the story. What is it about? What is Agnon trying to tell

us? As I understand it, it's a coming-of-age story. It's one of a genre of stories of a boy growing up and finding out about the real world, a story of how pain and suffering are permitted for the first time to intrude into the otherwise innocent, idyllic world of a child.

An interesting sidelight on the story: Agnon wrote it originally as a Bar Mitzvah present for 13-year-old Gershon Schocken, the son of his patron and publisher Zalman Schocken. Gershon's Bar Mitzvah was supposed to take place in Berlin in the spring of 1933. But (speak of a young man finding out about the real world), for reasons that I think you can understand, it took place a year later in Jerusalem. It is a story of a boy growing up, so that in the beginning of the story his only understanding of suffering, of problems, is his own loneliness, his own needs. But by the end of the story, he has learned that other people suffer more, and he has to take note of their needs as well.

It is sometimes called an "initiation story," and perhaps the prime example of it is the story of the Buddha, the founder of the Buddhist religion. He was born Prince Gautama, the young son of a wealthy, noble Indian family. His father wanted to make sure that his young son was protected from all knowledge of illness, death and ugliness. He built a high wall around the family estate and didn't permit anyone to enter, no servant, no family member, no delivery man, unless he was tall and handsome and physically fit, so that his young child growing up would never have to confront ugliness or sickness or deformity. One day, young Prince Gautama was playing ball (he must have been a young teenager) on the lawn of his estate. The ball bounced over a fence, and he climbed over the fence to try to find it. There, on the other side, he found sick and old and crippled and maimed and deformed and dying people, people the likes of whom he had never seen before in his life. According to the Buddhist legend, he was so overcome by this, he sat down under a tree (which was soon to become one of the holy places in Buddhism) and said, "I

won't move from here until I have understood how such things can exist in God's beautiful world."

This is the crisis that a young child growing up has to go through. In the Agnon story, the kerchief functions as a religious symbol. It's a kind of a tallit. It is put on the boy's shoulders by his parents when he becomes a Bar Mitzvah. It is used only on the Sabbath and Yom Tov. Frequently, Agnon uses the symbol of the tallit to talk about that which links God to the Jewish people, which, of course, is authentically one of the things that a tallit is about.

One of the most beautiful and one of the most famous lines in all of Agnon's stories is the opening line of *Agunot*; "It is taught: a thread of grace is spun and drawn out of the deeds of Israel, and the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself sits and weaves strand by strand, a tallit all grace and all mercy for the Congregation of Israel to deck herself in." And when Agnon describes the boy giving the tallit to the beggar, I think one of the things he is saying is that the purpose of religion is to reach out and help people, to assuage their pain, and not only to turn in on yourself and make yourself feel good. Childish religion guides a person to deal only with his own needs, his own problems, what makes him feel better. More mature religion sees God as moving you to reach out and help somebody else. For this tallit, for this immaculately clean kerchief to be soiled because it's given to the beggar, for Agnon, is not a sin or a sacrilege, it is the highest order of religious action. It is something of which both God and other people approve, as symbolized by the sun shining on the boy and warming him, and by his mother's smile of approval. There is something lacking in a religion that refuses to involve itself in the messiness of the world.

Why does the boy give the kerchief to the beggar? Did you understand that in the story? He does it because he wants to bring the Messiah, because he remembers all those legends of how the Messiah comes somewhere disguised as a beggar, and because

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nobody recognizes him and responds to him and nobody is kind to him, he goes away without revealing his identity and without redeeming the world. The boy wants to bring the Messiah so his father won't have to travel to Lashkovitz anymore, but can stay home with him. And in doing this, he learns a very important lesson: *you can bring the Messiah for somebody else much more easily than you can for yourself*. He doesn't bring his own redemption; he brings the beggar's redemption.

This, I think, is what it means to be grown up. It means finally coming to terms with the world's imperfections, realizing that the world is a much more complicated place than you used to think, and putting your own problems in the context of the whole world's rough edges and unevenness. The child thinks that he can bring the Messiah and make the whole world perfect. The adult understands how much he can do to bring the Messiah for other people, and hopes that somewhere there will be someone to bring the Messiah for him. He understands how much he can do to alleviate other people's problems more readily than his own, and if that doesn't make the whole world perfect, at least it makes his corner of the world discernibly better. And as the boy finds out at the end of the story, that can be a very exalting and a very satisfying feeling.

That is why Agnon wanted to tell this story to 13-year old Gershon Schocken, and why I wanted to share it with you tonight.