

WHILE BRENNER rebelled against religious practice, S.Y. Agnon was an observant Jew, and his work reflects deep love and vast knowledge of tradition, although, because of its extraordinary subtlety and complexity, he can never be offered as an apologist for Orthodoxy. Rena Lee, a long-time professor of Hebrew literature at Queens College in New York, does make him an apologist for vegetarianism – but not in a simplistic way.

Her *Agnon Vehatsimhonut* (“Agnon and Vegetarianism, Studies in the Works of S.Y. Agnon from the Vegetarian Standpoint”), also published by Reshafim, is a thorough and systematic survey of Agnon’s works, giving attention to themes such as the relation of meat-eating to other carnal appetites and the complex symbolic role that animals play in his writing.

She brings out the connection between vegetarianism and Judaism for Agnon, claiming that he gradually developed a “vegetarian-Tora worldview, in which he appears to be following in the footsteps of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, whom he venerated.” Vegetarianism is proposed as a utopian ideal, toward which Jews are directed to strive, with the laws of kashrut being viewed as a means of controlling and subduing one’s appetite for meat.

I must stress that Lee’s book is the work of a perceptive student of literature, not of a monomaniac whose only concern is condemning carnivores. She does not distort the works she discusses in order to wring out a vegetarian message. On the contrary, given the importance of vegetarianism in Agnon’s life, it is surprising that other scholars have neglected this theme.

The scholarly concern with Judaism revealed in these four books reflects personal commitment that is not uncommon in Israel.

Nevertheless, one seldom finds traditional Jews in contemporary Israeli fiction. Our novelists generally depict a secular world inhabited by modern, Western individuals who happen to be Hebrew speakers, and whose ties with Israel are neither religious nor ideological. I suspect that this failure to include Jewishness within Israeli literature is tacit admission of a weakness – a point that cannot be proved in a weekly book roundup. ■

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