Volume I

Nahum of Gamzo and his Mission to King Caesar

Nahum of Gamzo was sent to the king on behalf of the Jewish community, carrying with him a precious gift. When he was on his way, a gang of bandits stole the gift and filled up the case where it was stored with earth, to remove suspicion of the theft. Later on, when Nahum discovered the deception, he went on driving all the way to the king, putting his trust in God and believing that "this is also for the best" (*gam zo le-tovah*; a conviction suggested by his name, Gamzo). At the sight of the earth, the king ordered to kill Nahum and those who had sent him, but Elijah the Prophet appeared in the likeness of one of the king's ministers and demonstrated that this was marvelous earth, which turned into swords in times of war. The king was impressed by the gift and sent Nahum back, bestowing great honors on him. Now others, including those bandits who had robbed Nahum, tried to emulate Nahum's act and offer more earth to the king. Unfortunately they failed miserably and were duly punished.

   The story has a chiastic structure, at the center of which features Nahum's miraculous delivery. The theme as a whole consists of thirty-nine versions, divided into two major groups. The first includes versions originating in the Babylonian Talmud, tract *Sanhedrin* 108b. (the Sixth Century), which make references to the merits of Abraham our forefather, whose earth can be transformed into a weapon. In the second group, which originates, again, in the Babylonian Talmud (tract *Ta'anit*), כא, ע״א this story follows another story about Nahum of Gamzo, which focuses on his continuous sufferings. These stories lead to a common telos concerning the powerful virtues of placing one's trust in God and accepting sufferings with love. Some of the versions discuss the relation between trust in God and an illegitimate reliance on miracles. The Hasidic versions of the theme, composed in the 19th century, abridged the story but elaborated on the theological significance of

having trust in God's providence. In contrast to them, the versions produced within the framework of the *Haskalah* literature (the Hebrew Enlightenment), which were published in Vienna at the same period, embraced an anthropocentric notion that posited trust in God a human-existential need rather than a religious act.

The theme also occurs in modern Hebrew literature. In Agnon's "*Ha-Mitpahat*" (Jerusalem 1932), a mention of the story about Nahum of Gamzo foreshadows the transformation of the mother's kerchief from a physical into a metaphysical object thanks to the magical powers of Nahum of Gamzo.

Since the given theme has a didactic orientation, it is only natural that it has found its way into children's literature as well as into oral folktales. In fact, similar stories about people trying in vain, and being punished for, imitating a gift that has earned the king's admiration and gratitude (Aa-Th 1689A) have emerged in non-Jewish settings as well.

All in all there are thirty-nine extant versions of this theme.

Rabbi Joshua b. Levi and the Angel of Death

The hagiographic story about R. Joshua ben Levi and the Angel of Death first appears in the Babylonian Talmud, tract *Ketubbot 77b* (6th century). In this story, R. Joshua ben Levi meets the Angel of Death, who has come to take his soul. R. Joshua asks the Angel to show him his resting place in the Garden of Eden and then takes away his sword as a deposit. When they reach the Garden of Eden, R. Joshua slips away from the angel, flings himself down into the garden and swears to stay there forever. Since R. Joshua has never broken his oaths, God decides he should fulfill his last one as well, but makes him give the sword back to the Angel since the time has not yet come to abolish death forever.

For several hundreds years since its occurrence in the Babylonian version, this theme was absent in any written form until it re-emerged in *Eshkokl ha-Kofer*, a Karaite book of the 12th century, and kept unfolding henceforward. The Karaite version debates with the Talmudic story and makes a parody of it.

In MS Parma 2295 (Northern France, the end of the 13th century), there is an added description of some sages making a journey to heaven and hell. This description is in line with the great interest in celestial journeys, which was displayed in the contemporary Jewish and non-Jewish texts. Such a description of a celestial journey also characterizes the versions of the exiles from Spain and Portugal (the 15th and 16th centuries) and presumably results from the recognition that notions of the soul's immortality and national redemption give comfort to those who were subject to harsh decrees and expulsions.

In a number of narrative collections, the versions originating from the Talmudic fable were subject to various shifts of emphasis. Thus, in MS Jerusalem 1970 (Paris, the 14th century), the story acquires a mythological dimension by setting a contrast between the exemplary personality of R. Joshua ben Levi and the fearsome figure of the Angel of Death. In the halakhic book *Kol Bo* (Naples, 1490), the version adds to the Talmudic fable very detailed descriptions of heaven and hell. In Pseudo *Ben-Sira* (15th century), it is the magical elements involved in R. Joshua's activity that stand out.

The theme is manifested in a number of literary or didactic narrative collections of the 20th century that target on various readerships, such as youngsters and others. The theme is also represented in oral Jewish folktales, though in these versions the character of R. Joshua ben Levi is replaced by other characters, such as R. Hanina ben Dosa or Rabbi Judah Halevi. The writings of other cultures as well (Christianity and the Islam) offer stories about entering paradise by stratagems (Aa-Th 330*) or by playing tricks on the Angel of Death (motif R 185).

The theme is embodied in forty-four versions, some of which are preserved in manuscripts.

The *Tanna* and the Restless Dead

The story opens with an encounter that takes place in some demonic space, on the way to, or in the cemetery and involves a *tanna* and another character, which turns out to be a dead man. The latter is running along with a heavy load of thorns on his head. This load, he

says, signals his punishment in hell for a grave sin he committed in his lifetime. In response to the *tanna's* question whether there is any way to redeem him, the dead man answers that if he had a son who could stand amid the congregation and say "Bless you the Lord who is ever blessed", he would be vindicated. The *tanna* locates the dead man's son (who was born after his father's death) and with great efforts manages to teach him Torah, thus guiding him towards the restorative act of the *tikkun*. Finally, the dead man is revealed to the *tanna* in a dream and thanks him for freeing him from his torments.

This theme runs through seventy versions, rendered in a wide range of genres, which suggests that it has crossed the historical and geographical boundaries of various Jewish cultural centers. While the original versions do not expand the narrative, such expansion emerges as the distinguishing feature of later versions, beginning with the one found in the Cairo Genizah. Henceforward, the sage who comes across the dead man is called R. Akiva. The versions of the Midrash of the Decalogue, originating in the 10th century, introduce this theme as an exemplification of the commandment "Thou shall not commit adultery" and define the dead man's sin as having intercourse with a betrothed maiden on the Day of Atonement. In contrast, according to the versions in *Mahzor Vitry* and in *Or Zaru'a* (Ashkenaz, the 12th century), the dead man was a tax collector who sinned by favorably treating the wealthy while slaying the poor. In the version found in *Zohar Hadash*, a mystical book of the thirteenth century, emphasis is placed on the metaphysical aspects of the theme. *Ḥibbur ha-Ma'asiyyot ve-ha-Midrashot* (Venice, the middle of the 16th century), added several motifs of the preceding versions to form a broad and coherent plot. This version was copied into many manuscripts and printed works and served as a basis for the Yiddish versions. However, the Yiddish version in the first edition of the *Ma'aseh Book* (Basel, 1602) must have been influenced by a similar story that was circulating in the medieval Christian setting. In the Christian story, a dead man returns to his family and asks his relatives to say a mass for him in order to save him from hell. The Hasidic literature of the 18th and 19th centuries insists on the theurgic power of the *Kaddish* prayer and on the *Zaddik's* power to influence the fate of his followers. The theme is also widespread in the Hebrew narrative collections of the 20th century and in the oral folk tradition of the Jews. Down the ages, this theme was introduced in various contexts, such as male education, the Sabbath

Laws, and the Laws of mourning, for homiletic, ethical or halakhic purposes. One of the teleological implications of this theme is the mutual duty of father and son to each other: the father is obligated to teach his son Torah while the son has the duty to effect the transcendence of his father's soul by praying and studying Torah. The theme describes the opposite situation in which the father, who is the dead man, was remiss in his duty towards his son, while the *tikkun* was attained through the sage, whose teaching Torah to the son resulted in the renewal of the connection between father and son as well as between heaven and earth.

The Honey Jars

The story revolves around a widow who is forced to run away from her place of residence out of fear that the lord of the city might take possession of her by force. She hides her fortune in jars filled with honey and entrusts them with a loyal acquaintance of hers. The latter discovers the treasure, uses it and once again pours honey into the jars. Once the lord of the city dies, the woman returns to her hometown and demands her deposit. Upon realizing that the money is gone, she approaches King Saul, requesting him to judge her case. In the absence of any witnesses, the king is unable to do so, and it is young David who asks permission to bring her case to light. In the course of the legal deliberations, he smashes the jars and finds two gold coins stuck to the broken pieces, thus attesting to the woman's claim. Thereupon, the acquaintance is ordered to return the money to the widow, while the king and all Israel realize that the Holy Spirit has rested upon the lad David and that he is worthy of kingship.

   This thematic series consists of twenty two versions, the earliest of which appears in MS Vat. 285 of the 14th century, which is written in Aramaic. This is a unique version, whereas most of the other versions are modeled upon the second, Hebrew-written version, the one found in the collection *Parables of King Solomon* (Constantinople, 1517). According to some scholars, the international motif of hiding money under food (J1176.3: "Gold Pieces in the Honey-Pot"), as found in *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, is the source of the Jewish version. In the

epilogue of the Yiddish version found in the *Ma'aseh Book* (Basel, 1602), the lad David turns into an archetype of the ideal leader, whose wisdom emanates from divine authority, thus encapsulating the attributes of the future Messiah. The version of *Oseh Pele* (the middle of the 19th century) introduces some changes at both the level of the raw materials and the level of narrative functions, thus attaining greater coherence. Bialik, in his *And It Came to Pass* (Tel-Aviv, 1933) adapted the story into a unique literary piece characterized by episodic expansion. In his version, the theme is embedded in a historical setting of the conflict between Israel and the Philistines: the villain who plots to marry the widow by force is the commander of the Philistine garrison. Bialik also brings into focus the tension between King Saul and young David.

In the Jewish folk versions, this theme was associated with other exemplary figures known for their wisdom: King Solomon in the Tunisian version (IFA 6841) and Maimonides in the Yemenite version (IFA 7072).

The telos of the theme concerns the pursuit of truth and the conviction that truth must come to light. In contrast to the old judge, the young boy manages to uncover the truth because he is not bound by fixed habits of thinking. In this respect, this narrative belongs to a family of stories that center on "the clever judge," who pursues the truth in a creative and unconventional way (Aa-Th 926A).

Seven Good Years

There are thirty-five known versions of this theme, all of which revolve around the same characters. Elijah the Prophet, so the story goes, offers a man seven years of prosperity and asks him to choose whether to enjoy them right away or at the end of his days. Following his wife's counsel, and in contrast to the conventional narrative types (938 A B), the man prefers to receive the favor without delay and immediately invests the money, using the profits to engage in deeds of charity, which he carefully documents. When the time comes to give back the money, the man's wife presents God with the records of their almsgiving, which attest to the perfect conduct of the couple as faithful guardians of the "deposit"

entrusted to them. Significantly, while the versions originating in the Land of Israel treat the protagonists' poverty as a matter of fact, the versions produced in the Diaspora are indignant of this state of affairs.

The theme's versions belong to three distinct divisions. The first one, originating in the Midrash of Ruth Zuta (10th century), stresses the wife's merits in an added prologue and characterizes the relationship between the spouses as harmonious. To this division belong several written versions and most of the orally recorded versions.

The second division, originating with *Hibbur Yafeh me-ha-Yeshu'ah* (Rabbi Nissim, Kairouan, the 11th century) is characterized by a more realistic plot. Thus, instead of a homiletic prologue there is a frame story in which the narrator gets to know the protagonist. In addition, the centrality of the wife is conveyed neither by homiletic devices nor through the harmonious relationship between the couple but rather by portraying her as a rounded female character endowed with leadership qualities and by setting her in contrast to the hesitant figure of her husband, who lacks faith. Finally, the money is stolen from the couple in a natural way (by theft) and is similarly restored to them in a natural way (they dream of the specific hiding place of the stolen money).

The third division originates with I. L. Peretz's adaptation of the *Ma'aseh Book* version (dated the beginning of the 17th century). His own version incorporates elements that turn the fable from a story about charity into a narrative thematizing national-cultural and socialistic ideology. Accordingly, the protagonists do not enjoy the money while sharing it with others but rather keep toiling to make a living, in recognition of the value of labor, and channel the money towards furthering their children's education. Like Y. L. Peretz, other writers, too, replaced the notion of charity associated with wealth by an ideological commitment involving the renunciation of wealth. A similar trend also characterizes an orally recorded folk version (IFA 3482).

The Tale of Ben Sever and Shefifon ben Layish

The theme of Ben Sever's delivery from the Angel of Death unfolds in twenty-eight versions, the earliest of which are found in some

Ashkenazi manuscripts of the 13th century. Ben Sever is a fictitious hero who sets out on a mission of charity facilitated by the help of a crocodile turned into a dragon and a bridge. On his way back, Ben Sever is met by the Angel of Death who announces his approaching death. Ben Sever finds refuge with the sage Shefifon ben Layish, who does his best to protect him from the Angel when the latter arrives in the likeness of a heavy cloud and insists on taking Ben Sever's soul.

This thematic series consists of twenty-eight versions.

The earliest versions of the story are folkloristic: they are populated with mythical creatures and abound in hyperbolic exaggerations. In a Yemenite manuscript (1540) and in the first printed version (*Hibbur ha-Ma'asiyyot ve-ha-Midrashot ve-ha-Aggadot*, Venice 1551) the story is abridged, with the mythical motifs underplayed, in order to underline the moral aspects. The above-mentioned printed version gave rise to successive manuscript and printed versions. Noteworthy are the symbolic and narrative parallels between Shefifon ben Layish and the Crocodile, both of which are God's messengers, whose attitude towards the hero reverses as the story proceeds. It should also be noted that the character of Shefifon ben Layish (whose name is synonymous with Nahash ben Aryeh: a snake born out of a lion) is rooted in European iconography, while other magical and mythical details in the story can be traced back to the same European setting.

The Book of Genesis

The story involves a didactic debate on an educational matter: which book should schoolchildren be taught initially – Genesis or Leviticus? This fable conforms to the type of "a baby held captive by an animal" (Aa-Th 938), which was widespread among the Jews as the type of "a baby held captive by the gentiles." The child in question was on his way to school when he was kidnapped by one of the king's ministers and was held in captivity. After a while, the king became sick and asked to bring him some books to soothe his pain. The king's sages brought him the book of Genesis, but the king was unable to read the Hebrew text. So the stolen boy was fetched and he recited and interpreted the book

to the king's satisfaction. Impressed by the child's wisdom and the healing effect of the book, the king decided to restore the child to his family.

This story adopts various biblical motifs of heroes facing foreign kings (Joseph, Ehud, Esther). Unlike the book of Leviticus, which is concerned with specifically Jewish matters, the book of Genesis addresses a constituting universal theme, thus gaining a high standing even with a foreign king, which in turn reinforces its high-ranking position among the Jews.

This story is rendered in forty-seven versions. In the North-African and Yemenite settings it is told in brief but other versions expand it to a large extent (MS Dropsy College, 11th century, attributed to Rabbi Nissim Gaon; Ber Frenk, *Mahaneh Levi*, Yiddish, Prague 1827). Modern Hebrew writers adapted the story, each in his own way. Bialik incorporated a national orientation. Berdyczewski was bent on mythical-romantic tendencies. Agnon displays a theurgic orientation.

The Jewish Pope

The story concerns a Jewish boy who was kidnapped, was raised as a Christian and became a Pope – and then met his father and returned to the Jewish fold. The theme of the Jewish Pope is closely associated with the figure of Pope Anacletus II (elected in 1130), who was of Jewish descent, as well as with a narrative type featuring a boy who was sent away from home by his father and later became the Pope. A crucial change that occurs in accommodating this narrative type to the Jewish milieu is that the father plays no part in his son's removal from the parental home.

The story has three prototypical versions, from which all others proceeded. In the first one (MS, 15th century), the protagonist is Elhanan, the son of R. Simeon the Great of Mainz, who at the end of the story proclaims that Christianity is a false religion and commits suicide by jumping off the top of a tower. This version conforms to the martyrological values accepted by the pious Jews of Ashkenaz and the importance they attached to the repentant's confession of his sin and

proclamation of repentance. A version that appeared in Italy, presumably among the exiles from Spain, attributes the story to the son of Rabbi Solomon b. Adret (Rashba) of Barcelona, whose meeting with his father would induce him to announce in the marketplace that Christianity is a lie. A third prototypical version, originating in the *Ma'aseh Book* (Basel, 1602), once again associates the protagonist with Elhanan, the son of R. Simeon of Mainz, but expands the story in great detail. It describes the Pope's attitude toward the Jews of Rome, the stratagems through which he summoned his father, and the way in which the father recognized his son in the course of a chess game. This version also presents a somewhat different ending: the Pope writes a treatise against Christianity and flees in secret to live among the Jews of Mainz.

The 19th and 20th centuries saw the publication of three historical novels (authored, respectively, by Marcus Lehmann, in German, 1867; Mark Yodel, in Yiddish, 1947; and Yehiel Isaiah Trunk, in Yiddish, 1958), which were based on the theme's versions and significantly expanded them.

All in all there are thirty-six versions of this theme.

Rabbi Amram's Coffin

According to this hagiographic story, R. Amram instructed his disciples that after his death they should put his body in a boat that would take him to where he was supposed to be buried. The boat floated in the river, going upstream to his place of birth, where Jews and gentiles confronted each other over the body. In the course of the confrontation, which involved fistfights and miracles, the Christians built their house of prayer above the coffin, but the Jews managed to secretly replace the body and bury R. Amram in the proper place.

Originating in a Christian legend about Saint Emmeram, who was put to death and was then carried to his place of burial by an oxen-driven cart, the Jewish story first appears in a manuscript of *Shalshelet ha-Kabbalah*. (This book was published in Italy at the end of the 16th century, but the manuscript is earlier and differs from it.) Some of the narrative versions of this theme contain an epilogue that indicates this

story as the source of St. Emmeram's Abbey. In one of the manuscript versions of the story (dated the 16th century) the protagonist's name is rendered as Rabbi Eliezer ben Nathan of Mainz and the struggle over the coffin assumes a different character: the coffin is entrusted to a seaman, who is pressured by the Christians to deliver it to them. This version, unlike the others, has a humorous streak. Another outstanding, North-African version (Algiers, 1856) makes no mention of the tension between Jews and Christians over the burial. This version represents a reality in which Jews and Moslems had no conflicts over holy places and sometimes even jointly participated in the worship of local saints.

All in all, there are seventeen extant versions of this theme.