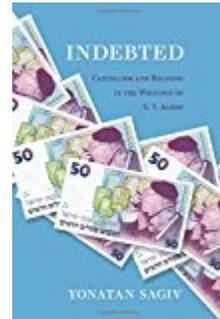




Yonatan Sagiv. *Indebted: Capitalism and Religion in the Writings of S. Y. Agnon*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2016. xx + 220 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-4457-7.



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Indebted: Capitalism and Religion in the Writings of S. Y. Agnon by Yonatan Sagiv is an important and timely addition to the scholarship on Agnon. Whereas previous scholarship on Agnon tended to expand on such themes as nationalism, religion and the Judaic tradition, or love in Agnon's work (for example, Anne Golomb Hoffman's *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* [1991], Elchanan Shilo's *The Kabbalah in the Works of S. Y. Agnon* [2011], and Ariel Hirschfeld's *Reading S. Y. Agnon* [2011]), Sagiv offers the first comprehensive analysis of Agnon's work with monetary issues in mind. One of the reasons many scholars have avoided focusing on economics in Agnon's oeuvre is that acknowledging Agnon's preoccupation, perhaps even obsession with finance runs the risk of aligning with antisemitic depictions of Jews. As Sagiv notes, during the turn of the twentieth century in Germany, the two main theories regarding the connection between economics and the "genesis of capitalism" were Max Weber's theory that "Protestant ethics laid the groundwork for capitalist rational production" and Werner Sombart's theory, which "emphasized the mercantile aspect of capitalism as located in Judaism and in the 'calculating' character of the Jews." Sagiv mentions the irony in the appropriation of Sombart's antisemitic theory by Zionist activists, who uti-

lized it in order to support their national solution of the "Jewish Question" (p. xv). With contemporary twenty-first-century politics and politicians still echoing some of these notions, it is crucial that we become aware of the way these ideas were dealt with by Agnon, the Galician-born author, who wrote some of his famous work in and about Germany, and would become renowned as the Israeli national author. Aware of the delicate aspects of his analyses, Sagiv examines several of Agnon's texts in light of monetary issues with great care and sensitivity. As political and economic changes shape our world, the role of finance and economics in the lives and identities of individuals and communities is palpable. The inquiry Sagiv extracts from Agnon's works regarding the connection between monetary issues and identities is, indeed, pertinent.

Indebted offers four chapters, "The Gift of Debt," "Talking through Money," "Can't Buy Me Love," and "The Incomplete Text and the Indebted Author," which are preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion. Sagiv also offers a preliminary chapter, "A Monetary Prelude: Agnon's Time in Germany," in which he contextualizes his analyses historically and within economic terminology. In "A Monetary Prelude," Sagiv claims that Agnon's work is imbued with his personal experience

with finance and that many of his texts explore the intersection between religious, national, and monetary discourses. Sagiv's analysis of Agnon's work is based on credit theory and the understanding of money as having extrinsic symbolic value, as opposed to a commodity with an intrinsic value. According to Sagiv, these ideas, and especially Georg Simmel's theories, had a profound influence on Agnon's conceptualization of his identity and his work.

In the introduction, Sagiv frames his analyses along the tensions between Jewish and modernist traditions in Agnon's work. Sagiv outlines these tensions in Hebrew and Yiddish literature more broadly, and highlights some of the main moments in Agnon's work in which monetary issues take front stage. Throughout *Indebted*, Sagiv focuses on monetary concerns in Agnon's texts in order to reveal how these economic aspects illuminate religious and linguistic issues.

In "The Gift of Debt," Sagiv reads Agnon's "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight" (1912) as "Agnon's attempt to rethink the economic constitution of modern Jewish identity after the breakdown of Jewish tradition in nineteenth-century Europe" (p. 17). Sagiv outlines the tensions between religious faith and capitalism throughout the novella, suggesting it depicts religion as an economy of debt. Sagiv traces the origins of this notion in Judaic tradition and shows how Agnon relies on these ideas in his consideration of the modern European Jewish relationship to money. Engaging with Marxist theories, Emmanuel Levinas's conceptualization of debt, Marcel Mauss's notions of the economy of the gift, and Jacques Derrida's critique of Mauss, Sagiv considers notions of debt, credit, guilt, and gift in his analysis of "And the Crooked." Reading the text through these prisms of monetary discourse, Sagiv reveals how the story reconstructs modern Jewish identity within an already known and established religious economy of perpetual debt. The Jewish subject remains indebted within the capitalist economy as well as within the divine economy, and Agnon condemns both Jewish traditional economy of debt and modern capitalism. Yet eventually, according to Sagiv's interpretation of the end of the story, Agnon's protagonist subverts traditional economies of faith and religion.

Alongside the main investigation of the intersections between religious faith and monetary economy, "The Gift of Debt" commences the analysis of the connections between the economic symbolic system and the language of faith. This thread is expanded on in the following chapter, "Talking through Money," which offers a reading of *A Guest for the Night* (1938) that reveals the similarities

of money and language as semiotic signs. Sagiv argues that the "*A Guest for the Night* undermines trust in both Judaism and Zionism by presenting money as possessing both material and symbolic significations" (p. 53). Indeed, as Sagiv observes, while the narrator of the novel rejects both Judaism and Zionism, "it is important to note that these two contexts are at times opposed" (p. 67). *A Guest for the Night*, according to Sagiv, "becomes a battleground between sacred language and money: two different systems of signification straggling over the definition of value" (p. 56).

The penultimate chapter, "Can't Buy Me Love," utilizes psychoanalysis to expose the basic sense of lack that motivates the two characters in Agnon's *A Simple Story* (1935). Sagiv argues that "Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalytic conceptualizations of self and love are modeled on economic infrastructures" and that Agnon's novel should be read not as a narrative of the tension between the economic and psychological discourses but rather of the convergence of the two (p. 92). This innovative reading of *A Simple Story* as an investigation of "the intertwining of the public socio-economic and the private subjective spheres" sheds light not only on the story but also on the connections between modern European Jewish economic and psychological structures (p. 99).

The final chapter, "The Incomplete Text and the Indebted Author," reads "The Garment" (1950) as "a self-reflective narrative on the art of narrative itself" (p. 136), as Sagiv weaves the threads of economy and literature to depict the links between Agnon's protagonist and Agnon the author. Locating Agnon's work within the modernist tradition, Sagiv explains Agnon's obsession with incomplete endings. Furthermore, Sagiv's analysis highlights the problematic "paradoxical imagery of 'writing as the weaving of a torn garment'" as a modernist trope (p. 139), which nonetheless can be traced to the foundations of literary theory. Alongside the preoccupation with incompleteness, Sagiv traces the issue of debt in Agnon's work, showing how the two are interrelated. Ultimately, Sagiv suggests that Agnon's work must forever oscillate between the profound levels to which he is indebted to Judaic tradition, and the inability to repay this debt.

In his conclusion, Sagiv shows how his readings outline the centrality of monetary issues in Agnon's work and the ways in which these themes connect to other well-established themes in Agnon's work, such as religion, love, and authorship. Indeed, after reading *Indebted* one cannot help but see all of Agnon's work in light of Sagiv's readings, and we should surely see more analyses follow in Sagiv's path.

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