

Half Faith, Half Heresy: Between S.Y. Agnon and Gershom Scholem

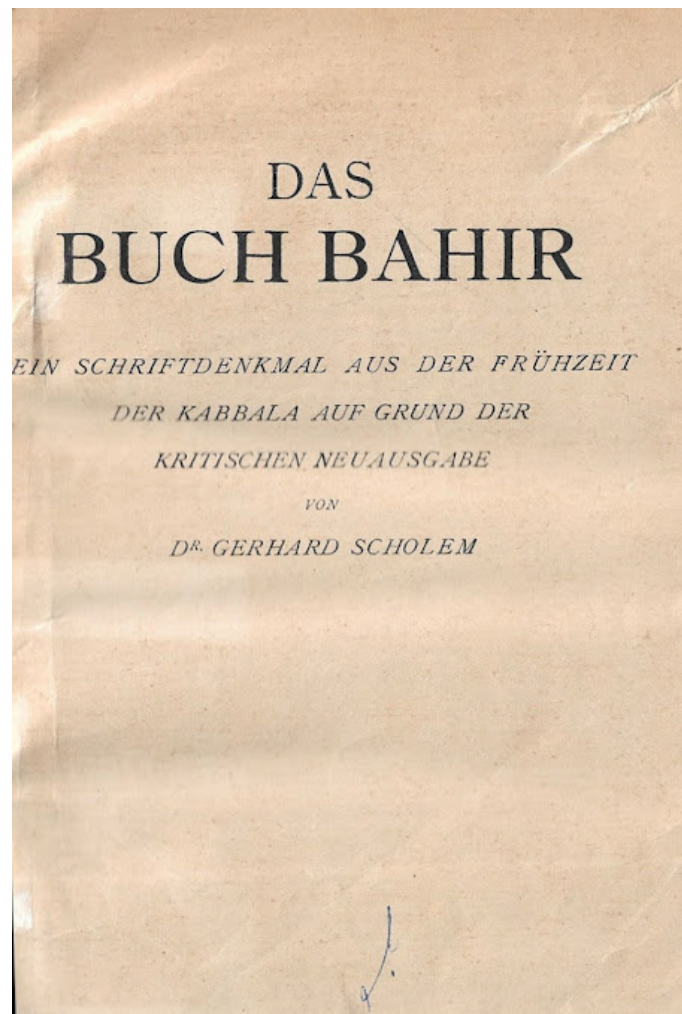
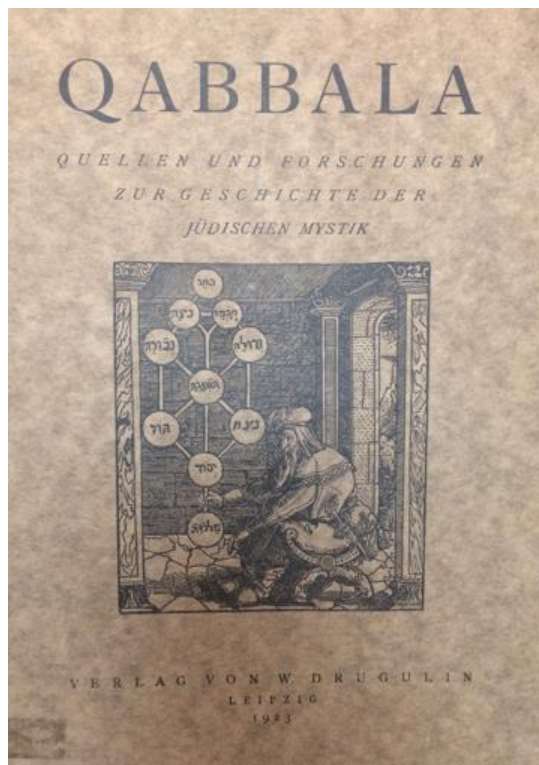
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Half Faith, Half Heresy: Between S.Y. Agnon and Gershom Scholem

Jeffrey Saks

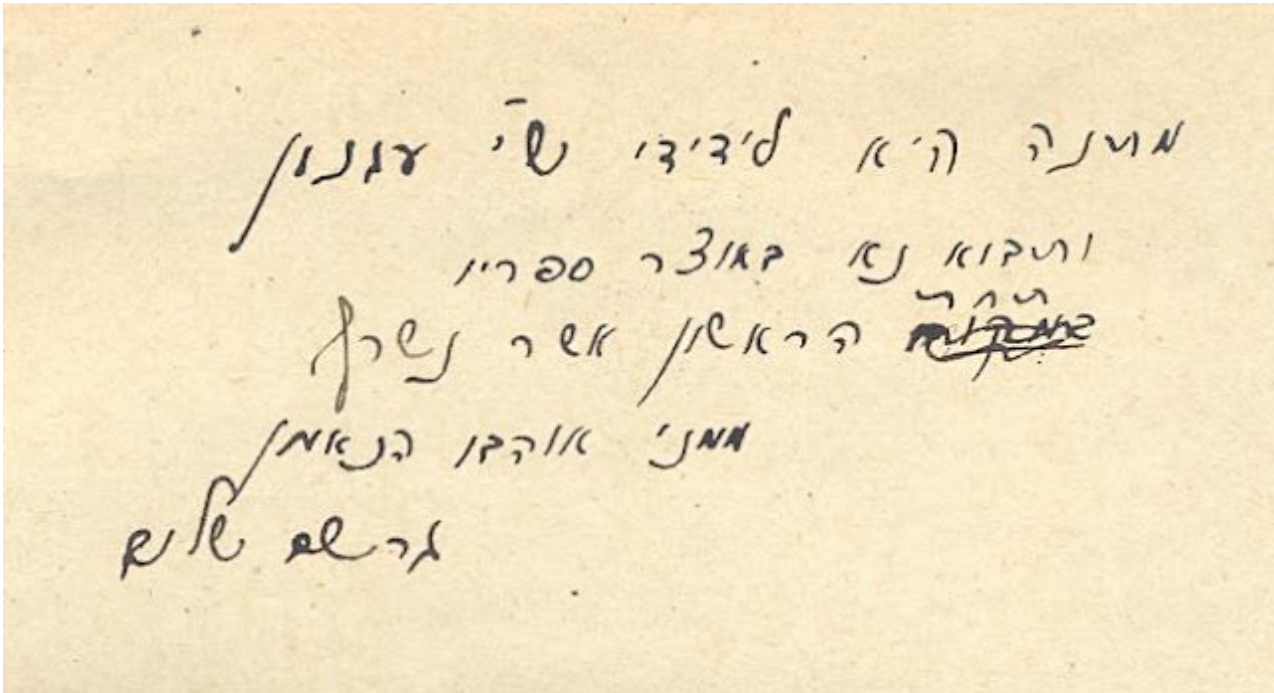
The bonds of friendship between S.Y. Agnon and Gershom Scholem are well documented in their writings and in the copious scholarship on the celebrated Nobel laureate and the revered professor of Jewish mysticism. In this context, the interview that Dan Miron conducted with Scholem about Agnon (broadcast on Israeli television in February 1981, a year before Scholem's death) is noteworthy. The recording (part 1 not preserved; [part 2](#) and [3](#) available) and the transcript of the interview (in [Hebrew](#) or [translation](#)) are available online.

Agnon and Scholem met during the First World War, in the reading room of the Jewish Community Library in Berlin. Last summer, we marked the [centennial of the burning of Agnon's house in Bad Homburg](#), an event that brought the writer's fruitful stay in Germany to an end. On the night of June 4-5, 1924, Agnon's fellow tenant set fire to his apartment in the shared building in an act of arson and insurance fraud, thus proving the Sages' adage, "Woe to the wicked, woe to his neighbor" (M. *Negaim*, 12:6). The Agnon family lost almost all of their possessions in this fire. In addition to the manuscripts of two almost-finished books, "four thousand Hebrew books, most of which I inherited from my ancestors and some of which I bought with money I scrimped from my daily bread," went up in flames, as Agnon later recounted in his speech at the Nobel Prize ceremony in 1966. Among these 4,000 books was at least one that Agnon had received as a gift from Scholem: the young scholar's first publication, *Das Buch Bahir*, a product of Scholem's doctoral dissertation. It was an annotated German translation of a Hebrew manuscript from 1298 of that ancient Kabbalistic text. The book was published by Druglin in Leipzig in 1923, and subtitled *Ein Schriftdenkmal aus der Frühzeit der Kabbala auf Grund der kritischen Neuausgabe*, which means: "A written monument from the early days of Kabbalah based on a new critical edition." It appeared in a series called *Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte der Jüdischen Mystik* (Sources and Researches on the History of Jewish Mysticism). On the cover, decorated with a woodcut image of a Kabbalist next to a diagram of the Ten Sefirot, is the title "Qabbala." The backstory of the publication of this dissertation—published at the height of the German inflationary period on a rather esoteric subject—is told by Scholem in *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth* (Schocken Books, 1980), 142-143.



Gerhard (Gershom) Scholem, *Das Buch Bahir* (Leipzig, 1923).

In the same year that he published his edition of the *Bahir*, Scholem left Germany for the Land of Israel, arriving on Yom Kippur 1923. A little over a year later, Agnon also left Germany and returned to Jerusalem on Friday, *erev Shabbat Parashat Noah* 1925. Upon renewing their relationship, Scholem gave Agnon another copy of his book in place of the original, which had been consumed by the flames in Bad Homburg. As an inscription Scholem wrote:



Scholem inscription to Agnon on *Das Buch Bahir* (Agnon House Library, #2473).

A gift to my friend S.Y. Agnon
May this enter the treasury of his books
Instead of Replacing the first one that was burned
From me, his faithful loving [friend]
Gershom Scholem

Like many new arrivals he was self-conscious of his Hebrew, making occasional errors in his speech (less so in writing). The inscription shows that Scholem had written and crossed out the word *bimkom*, replacing it with the more poetic *tahat*. Is there a hint in this edit (on a note to one he considered master of the Hebrew language) to this self-consciousness on the part of the new immigrant to the Hebrew Republic? Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Scholem deliberated between two job offers: teaching mathematics in a high school or working in the National Library. It was clear that librarianship was a better fit for his personality and interests, but he himself admitted that he was afraid that in school “who could say whether my pupils would not laugh at my Berlin-accented Hebrew?” (*From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 163).

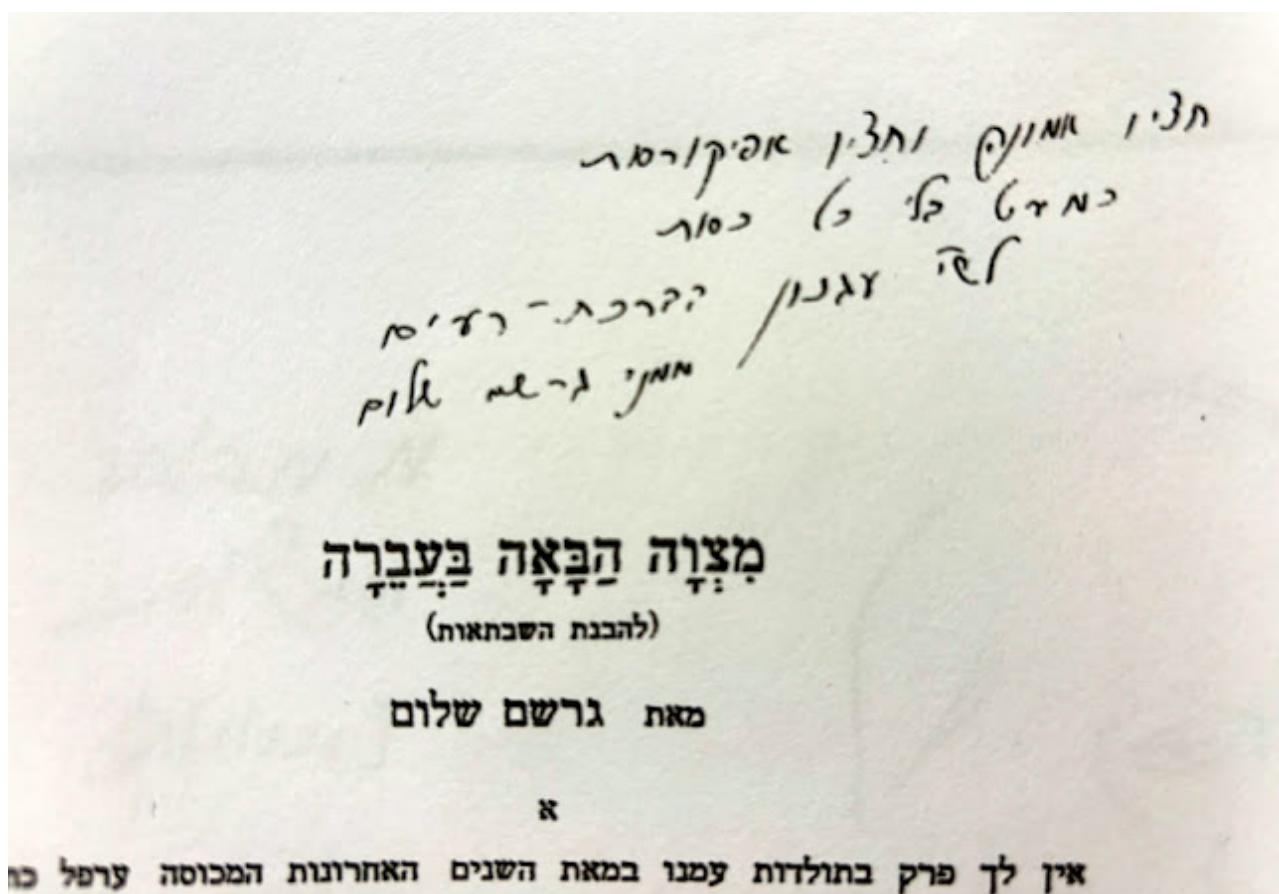
The Agnon House library in Jerusalem preserves dozens of books, booklets, and offprints by Scholem, many of which bear dedications from the author to Agnon. Agnon, for his part, paid tribute to Scholem and he too inscribed books in exchange (see, for example, an enigmatic dedication from 1952 to his book *Ad Henah*, published by [David Assaf on the Oneg Shabbat website](#)).

One of the most interesting dedications is written on an offprint of Schalom’s well-known article “*Mitzvah Ha-ba’ah be-Aveirah*,” which was first printed in *Knesset: Divrei Sofrim in Memory of H.N. Bialik*, vol. 2, edited by Fischel Lachower (Bialik Institute, 1937), 347-392.

The article appears in English as “Redemption Through Sin,” translated by Hillel Halkin, in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (Schocken Books, 1971), 78-141 (the acknowledgment on p. 365 misstates the publication date as 1937 rather than the correct December 1936).

This is one of Scholem’s most important studies that broke new ground in understanding Sabbateanism, and it shaped all subsequent research on the subject. Later, the article was republished at the beginning of his collection *Mehkarim u-Mekorot le-Toldot ha-Shabtaut* (Bialik Institute, 1974), and just last year in a new edition edited by Yonatan Meir, supplemented with an introduction, a comparison of the article’s manuscripts and published versions, notes, and appendices (Blima Books, 2024).

In this broad-ranging article, Scholem sets Sabbateanism as a touchstone through which the continuity of Israel’s history should be reassessed. In his opinion, that false messianic movement led to a disconnect between Halakha and Rabbinic Judaism, on one side, and Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism on the other. The vacuum created in the space in between allowed the rise of modern movements such as the Jewish Enlightenment, secularism, and Zionism. One of Scholem’s well-known assertions in this article is that Rabbi Yonatan Eybeschutz was a believer in Shabbtai Zvi, as his contemporary Rabbi Yaakov Emden had claimed (see the Y. Meir edition, p. 52 and especially in n. 15). This claim provoked the ire of scholars from the rabbinical world, which may explain the Hebrew rhyme that Scholem wrote on the offprint he gifted to Agnon:



Scholem inscription to Agnon on “*Mitzvah Ha-ba’ah be-Aveira*” (Agnon House Library).

Half-faith and half-heresy
Almost completely undisguised
To S.Y. Agnon, with friendships' blessing
From me, Gershom Scholem

In the 1981 interview with Dan Miron, Scholem mentioned the fact that Agnon stood by him when he was attacked by religious and Haredi scholars who were upset by what he wrote in "*Mitzvah Ha-ba'ah be-Aveirah*" and in subsequent articles. Miron asked about this and the extent of Agnon's interest in academic research in Jewish studies in general. Scholem replied:

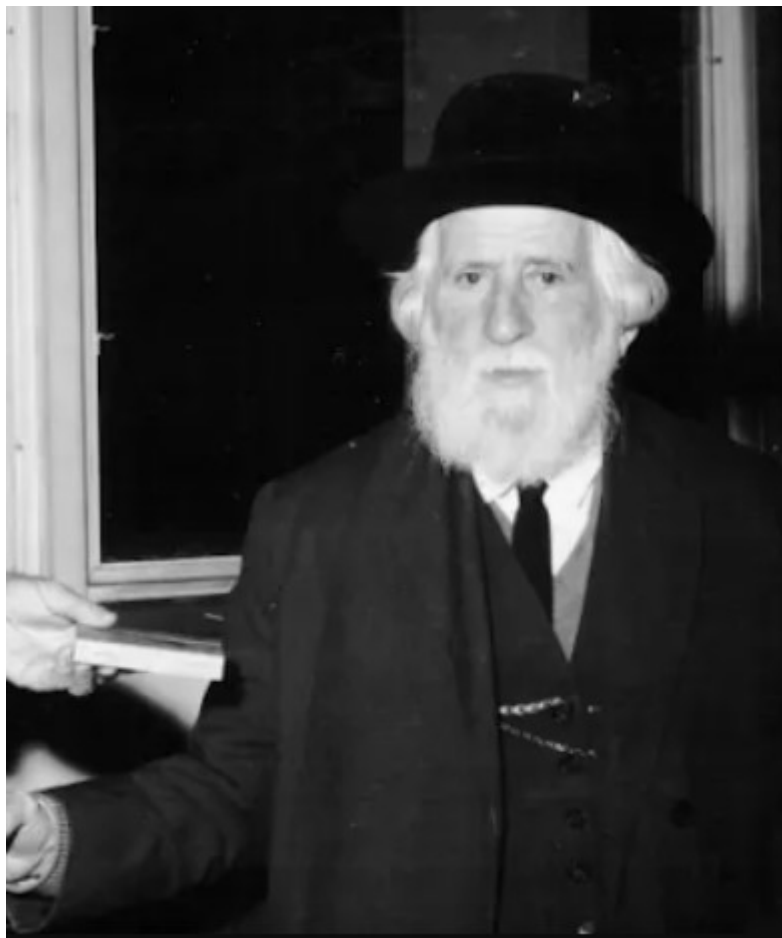
He was interested, he wanted to hear details, understand my grounds for saying what I did. The details were what interested him, the research. He stood up for me when rabbis came and said to him: He's such an aberration, that Scholem—a perfect ignoramus where the Torah is concerned, Talmud he knows nothing of—and he says the most outrageous things about Sabbetaians, and so on and so forth. Because so long as I wrote about the Zohar, nobody cared a bit, you see, but when I happened to mention in one line—after being convinced of the truth of it—that Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschütz had been a Sabbetaian—Heaven help me! Agnon's friends from Poalei Agudat Yisrael—that was a large part of Agnon's theatrics, his friendship with the Poalei Agudat Yisrael people—well, their rabbis called on him and they said whatever it was, and Agnon told them: "You don't understand what it's all about, you don't understand what Scholem is doing." So when I came to see him, he told me: "Rabbi So-and-So just left here ten minutes ago, and he called you a..." And he told me what his answer to the rabbi had been too. In a word, Agnon could have regard for a scholar when he considered there was some point to his work. And in all, it was a matter of individuals—respecting some, and some not—because research as such didn't frighten him, because what did he care whether the Zohar was written at the time of the Tannaim so and so many centuries later. Agnon would have been the first to understand a thing like that. But the world of research in general—that, I think, did not exist for Agnon.

"Gershom Scholem on Agnon: Interview by Dan Miron—Part Two," *Ariel* 53 (1983), 62-63.

It is unclear who Agnon's Haredi "friends from Poalei Agudat Yisrael" were. It is possible that at the time of the interview, 45 years after the publication of "*Mitzvah Ha-ba'ah be-Aveirah*," Scholem confused them with members of Mizrachi and the Religious Zionist Community, since among his staunch critics were Yitzhak Werfel (later Yitzhak Raphael, who also went under the penname A. Hashiloni) and Rabbi Reuven Margolies (1889-1971), both of whom were identified with Religious Zionism.

After Scholem deepened and substantiated his assertion regarding R. Eybeschütz's Sabbatean beliefs (in a [critical review of a psychoanalytic biography](#) of R. Emden written in English by Mortimer Cohen), Margolies published a [harsh response](#) against Scholem. Margolies, who authored dozens of Torah books, was then the chief librarian of the

Maimonides Library in Tel Aviv (now part of Beit Ariella) and was a distinguished Torah scholar. The current librarian, R. Avishai Elbom, published a column "[Rabbi Reuven Margolies vs. Professor Gershom Scholem](#)" (Am HaSefer Blog, 2021) reviewing the controversy that spilled over into adjacent topics in Zohar research.



Rabbi Reuven Margolies (1967)

Scholem, for his part, authored a twenty-page pamphlet published by Schocken in 1941 and titled *Leket Margaliot* (whose English subtitle would be: *Assessing the New Defense of Rabbi Yonatan Eybeschutz*). It is reprinted in his *Mehkarei Shabtaut*, edited by Yehuda Liebes (Am Oved, 1991), 686-706, with a bibliographical appendix reviewing the substance and stages of the debate. The pamphlet was a sharply worded response to Margolies' criticisms.

A copy of the pamphlet with an inscription from Scholem to Agnon survives in the Agnon House collection:

ל"י צגנון / ידידי וחצי זמאמרי קדמי (טור)
עזיבך גיג אום

לקט מרגליות

(להערכת הסניגוריה החדשה על ר' יונתן אייבשיץ)

מאת

גרשם שלום

Scholem inscription to Agnon on *Leket Margaliot* (Agnon House Library, #2839).

To S.Y. Agnon, my friend and comrade in the war against the ignoramuses (amei ha'aretz).

With blessings, Gershom Scholem

Agnon appreciated Scholem's dual personality: an open faith and an almost undisguised heresy. As far as we know, he had little or no relationship with R. Reuven Margolies, who was also a native of Galicia, despite their common affinities. The years of Agnon's and Margolies' lives overlapped almost entirely. Margolies, a Lviv native studied in Agnon's hometown of Buchach, receiving *semikha* from Rabbi Meir Arik (1855-1925), the town's *dayyan* and *posek*, who appears a number of times in Agnon's *'Ir u-Meloah (A City in Its Fullness)*, a collection of his tales of Buchach. The Agnon House library has thirteen of Margolies' books in its collection, but unlike the inscriptions that memorialize the warm friendship between Agnon and Scholem, there is not a single dedication to Agnon in Margolies' books.

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