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Booklover--Grace Forgiveness Unity

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The summer of 2015 forever changed the community of Charleston, SC. White supremacy raised its ugly head and removed nine souls from this community. The humidity in our summer air could well be the product of tears. So many eloquent words have been written and spoken about this horrific event. And this will probably continue for a while as processing all of this will take a very long minute. Each of the many articles, editorials, commentaries, and speeches I have read and heard have left an impression, caused me pause or pushed me to contemplate uncomfortable realities. However, the piece entitled *Kaddish for the Emanuel Nine* written by **Rabbi Avi Weiss** of the **Hebrew Institute of Riverdale**, Bronx, NY published in *The Post and Courier* on Tuesday, July 7, 2015 struck a different cord. My current literary choice from my **Nobel** laureate list was a Jew. **Weiss** wrote: "My father died a few weeks ago. The hardest part of the shiva (mourning period) was when it ended. Friends and family were, by and large, no longer visiting. I was alone in pain and agony. I thought of this reality during my visit to the **Emanuel AME Church** in Charleston merely two weeks after the racially-motivated massacre killed nine people." He continues with a description of his participation in the Bible Study after the massacre in the very space where it had occurred. It is a lot to take in. After the study it was time for the kaddish, the memorial prayer, for his father. He acquired his prayer quorum and gathered at Folly Beach: "As I recited the kaddish for my father I wanted to also say it in the memory of the nine Emanuel martyrs. I wondered if my father would take exception." In the end: I heard him whisper, "well done, my son, well done. The love that defies the rule will be victorious over the hate that defies the rule."

For no good reason, I decided to start at the alphabetic beginning of the authors who had won the **Nobel Prize** in Literature and planned a visit to the **Charleston County Library**. The book I intended to check out during that visit was **S.Y. Agnon's** *A Book That Was Lost and other Stories*. My planned visit was the Thursday after the tragedy. It was a few days before I went. The main branch of the library is just a short distance from the **Emanuel A.M.E.** church on Calhoun Street. When I felt it was appropriate to go, I spent some time at the growing memorial before entering the library. It is a powerful physical representation of grace, forgiveness and unity in the face of an unthinkable act. Now it is time to read, ponder and process.

Shmuel Yosef Agnon, born **Shmuel Yosef Halvei Czaczkes**, shared the 1966 **Nobel Prize** in Literature with the German poet, **Nelly Sachs**. His hometown of Buczacz has a lineage that defines the politics and wars of the region: originally Polish, then Austrian,

back to Poland, Ukranian, German occupation during WWII and currently a part of the Ukraine. Jews settled in the area during the early 16th century. Buczacz suffered the effects of these various footprints on its soil but the Jewish community paid the ultimate price of lives during all the occupations. All these elements as well as details from his own life as an Eastern European Jew who lived in Germany and immigrated to Israel are captured in **Agnon's** writings.

A Book That Was Lost and other Stories is a posthumous publication of **Agnon's** short stories. The front sleeve of the cover describes **Agnon** as "the towering genius of modern Hebrew literature." The **Nobel** committee honored him "for his profoundly characteristic narrative art with motifs from the life of the Jewish people." Each section of stories is introduced, reviewed, analyzed, and dissected by the editors **Alan Mintz** and **Anne Golomb Hoffman**. In addition, they punctuated the collections with notes and a glossary. Their affection for **Agnon** is witnessed by their own crafting of words: "Many storytellers have arisen to tell the story of East European Jewry, but the achievement of **S.Y. Agnon** remains singular. His canvas is wider, his erudition vaster, his humor wrier, his irony subtler. Above all, like any great writer, his art transcends the limits of its ostensible subject. To be sure, **Agnon's** writing is inseparably entwined with the very particular culture of Polish Jewry and its continuation in the Land of Israel." A variety of translators participated in this project and their names are placed at the end of each story.

I will leave you with a sampling of **Agnon's** wordcraft taken from four stories in the book. *Knots upon Knots* is an expression from the older **Agnon** and deals with books, writing, book binding and the community of word craftsmen; *A Book That Was Lost* where **Agnon** uses the metaphor of a lost book to depict the journey from Buczacz to Jerusalem; *On One Stone* set in eastern Europe and again describing a relationship with writing; *The Sense of Smell* deals with the influence of mystical traditions in writing on **Agnon**.

Knots upon Knots: "One who is not burdened with things is free to do whatever his heart desires. I stood among my things and thought to myself, When did I ever have need of you and when will I ever need you? And there they lay, casting a shadow upon themselves, a thick and thickening shadow. And if there is no substance in a shadow, substance there is in those who cast shadows."

A Book That Was Lost: "Of course, most of **Magen Avraham's** commentary is obscure and enigmatic due to over abbreviation. For though a man of great learning, he was poor, without the means to buy paper on which to write, and used to write his novellae on the face of the table and on the wall, and when a piece

of paper came into his hands, he would compose his thoughts and jot down their essence in extremely concise language. Out of fondness for **Magen Avraham**, **Rabbi Shmaria** took upon himself to construe, interpret, and explain it for every student to learn and understand. I don't know for how many years **Rabbi Magen Avraham** was occupied with his work. As for **Rabbi Shmaria**, I heard that it took him twelve years to define, elucidate, and construe each and every expression. He left no difficult passage uninterpreted. At the end of twelve years he checked and found nothing further to add or to detract."

"I can't tell whether poems of Zion and Jerusalem brought me to Jerusalem or whether it was my longing for Zion and Jerusalem that brought me to compose poems about them. Either way, it was my good fortune to go and settle in the Land of Israel."

"So the years passed. The librarian went the way of all flesh and the librarian who succeeded him has also passed on, but the book was found. What a pity the book was lost."

On One Stone: "As though in a vision I saw the rock and the writing inside it. I could discern every letter and word, every line, every page of writing, every leaf. Had these writings belonged to the root of my own soul, I would have read them, and out of them I would have fashioned worlds. But I don't deserve to read them; I could only sit and look. My eyes would surround them like metal settings in which precious stones are placed but which never combine with the stones themselves."

The Sense of Smell: "I was worried that perhaps I had strayed from proper usage and done harm to the beauty of the language. I went and looked in reference books but found no support for my usage. Most of the books either tell you what you already know or else tell you nothing at all. I went to the scholars of our time, and they did not know what to answer me. Scholars know everything except that particular thing you are looking for." 🌿

Postscript: Cynthia Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lance, DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Clementa Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel L. Simmons Sr., Sharonda Singleton, and Myra Thompson are the names of the nine souls who paid with their lives demonstrating openness in the sanctity of their church while contemplating God's word. Grace, forgiveness and unity are what their families demonstrated to the community while grieving. May we pay attention and learn. And may eloquent words continue to be crafted in their memory.