

ABSTRACT

FROM THE OTHER TO MYSELF:
THE CHARACTER OF ELISHA BEN ABUYA IN
AGNON'S 'PAT SHLEMA'

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This article deals with Agnon's story, 'Pat Shlema', in which he follows the protagonist's journey as a way to examine the theological meaning of the Torah study in the modern era. The article focuses on a single character who meets the hero during the journey, Mr. Grassler. The numerous intertextual references that refer to Mr. Grassler show that Agnon intended him to resemble the Talmudic figure of Elisha ben Abuya, the heretic, known in the Talmud as Other (*akher*). Ben Abuya, who was raised in the Beit Midrash, and who lived after the destruction of the Temple in a difficult period of persecutions, chose not to keep the Shabbat commandment and to violate the three commandments that must be observed under any circumstances. Although Elisha ben Abuya rejects obedience to Halakha, he still takes intellectual pleasure in Torah study, leading the rabbis of the Talmud to deal with the tough questions: What is the value of the Torah without its observance? and is it possible to relate to ben Abuya's Torah as isolated from his deeds?

The article shows the complex relationship between the sages of the Talmud and Other: while they condemn him and his theology, they still preserve tales about him. This article shows how Agnon's use of the figure of Elisha ben Abuya in the story 'Pat Shlema' is not provocative. Rather it continues a Talmudic tradition.