

## **SAMĪR NAQQĀSH: BETWEEN THE SACRED AND THE DEMONIC**

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This paper describes some of the exilic literary issues that preoccupied the Jewish-Iraqi author Samīr Naqqāsh (1938–2004), who emigrated from Iraq to Israel at age thirteen, yet eschewed Hebrew and wrote only in Arabic. Though Naqqāsh's characters were mainly Jewish, his stories project a natural universalism. A product of the twentieth-century world of upheavals and existentialism, he experienced the troubled existence of one severed from his roots and left without providence, meaning, or purpose. The present article argues that the unifying theme that operated throughout his life and in all his fiction was that modern humanity has lost its way in a labyrinthine realm between the sacred and the demonic.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this paper is to review the corpus of Samīr Naqqāsh (1938–2004), an Iraqi-born Israeli author who wrote in Arabic and addressed a wide range of existentialist threats that embraced the “death of God” and loss of faith, which placed him and modern man between sacred and demonic forces and spelled humanity's loss of control in a strange new world.

Naqqāsh's writings reflect the troubled existence of modern man severed from his geographical roots, lost and leading an existence without any compass. He describes a dichotomous reality in which the benevolent Supreme Authority exists but stays hidden and alienated from man, leaving the world in the grip of infernal, destructive forces. These forces rule the world with the complicity of man, who takes an active role in the havoc they wreak. In such a reality, chaos reigns and dehumanization and the absurd are the norms.

Naqqāsh's characters reflect the trauma of split or multiple personalities. Like himself, they are Jews who emigrated from Iraq to Israel and never recovered from the shock of being uprooted from their beloved city of Baghdad. Welcomed with humiliation and contempt for their religious and traditional customs, many emigrants from Iraq and other Oriental countries abandoned their ancient Jewish rituals and practices.

Naqqāsh experienced a great shock when forced to adjust to life in Israel, and he never recovered from it. The writing of stories both assuaged his violent reaction to his new situation and gave him the means to cry out with eloquence and nostalgia in the name of his fellow sufferers. In terms of their content, the demonic represents the realities of immigration to Israel and the modern world, while the sacred carries the memories of an old and beautiful world lost forever.

Samīr (Moshe) Naqqāsh never overcame the trauma of the forced abandonment of his Baghdadi home life, and he never developed a sense of belonging in Israeli society. On the contrary, he carried in his heart and soul his emotional identity of being part of Iraq's ancient, well-integrated Jewish community. The religious, social, and cultural values of his childhood were constantly relived in his imagination. Despite being physically located in the free, democratic Jewish state, he identified himself with his birthplace and a two-thousand-year history of living in exile.

Despite the depth, originality, and universality of Samīr Naqqāsh's oeuvre, it has received proportionally very little popular, critical, or academic recognition. This is for two reasons: first, it is written in a very difficult, almost codified form of Arabic. Second, its convoluted style, resembling first-person stream of consciousness, is difficult for most readers to follow.

Naqqāsh's rich language reveals that he had a consummate command of Arabic despite coming to Israel in his early teens and the immense pressure there to adopt Hebrew. His works utilize several local Iraqi dialects – especially the vernacular of the Baghdadi Jews, thus serving to document and preserve a dialect that is gradually disappearing from the world (Elimelekh 2013a: 63–75).

The intellectual life of the Jewish community of Baghdad underwent a great transformation in the 1920s. The change was led by a handful of intellectuals imbued with the vision of integrating into Arabic culture. The Jews' assimilation into various aspects of cultural life constituted an accurate reflection of the Jewish community's genuine conviction, especially during the 1920s and 1930s, that Iraq was their one and only homeland (Snir 2008: 49, 74).

When scholars examine the works of the first generation of Jewish writers in Iraq, who were active in the first half of the twentieth century and wrote in Standard Arabic, they can see, as Shmuel Moreh (1981: 16) writes, “that the Jewish writers tried to strike roots in the literary life of their country of birth and its culture, economy, and society. They wanted to create a typical Arabic-Iraqi literature.” These writers expressed themselves in an exquisitely elegant style, thanks to their tireless study of the Arabic language, the language of the Iraqi intelligentsia, which they preferred over French and Hebrew (Snir 2008: 53).<sup>1</sup>

The mass immigration of Iraq's Jews to Israel in 1950–1951 naturally dampened the idea of integration into Iraqi society and culture (Qazzaz 1991: 294). What is more, many of the immigrant Iraqi intellectuals were profoundly discouraged by the difficulties they encountered in Israel – economic hardships, the challenges of integrating into a new society, and gaining fluency in a new language. Meanwhile, their love for Arabic culture was so strong that many continued writing in Arabic. The 1950s saw a significant increase in the number of Iraqi-born Israeli authors and journalists who published in their native tongue. Yet the majority addressed urgent social and political issues, rather than the themes that traditionally concerned them in Iraq, such as love, universal social and moral issues, the status of women, and the like. And lacking a viable audience for their Arabic writing, most of these authors quickly shifted to writing in Hebrew (Snir 2008: 252–254, 309). However, Samīr Naqqāsh chose to remain faithful to his Arabic roots and never abandoned the language of his childhood.

Naqqāsh was born in 1938 to a middle-class Jewish family, the eldest of six children. His family home was a meeting place for Jews, Muslims, and Christians from all walks of life, which allowed him to become familiar with the different Iraqi Arabic dialects that he later utilized in his writing.

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<sup>1</sup> Snir notes that according to the writer and physician Salman Darwish (1910–1982) (1981: 200), Hebrew had become a purely liturgical language in Iraq.

At the early age of eight or nine, he translated *Hamlet* into Arabic.<sup>2</sup> At about the same age he read *Arabian Nights* and other mystical and supernatural narratives. These tales led him to have frightening thoughts and reflections uncharacteristic of such a young child. In the early 1950s while still in Baghdad, he and his sister founded a magazine that included stories written by Naqqash himself, articles, and general information, including material about Zionism.

In a short autobiographical statement, Naqqash writes that already in early childhood, between the age of five and seven, he had a “weakness” for books. Once his family visited a family friend who had a complete library in his house, and young Naqqash “jumped on the books as a bird of prey on the prowl”. Naqqash indicates that he and his sister had read “thousands of books, basically all world literature” that had been translated into Arabic. Also, they loved to hear tales from their grandmother and others.

In 1950, when he was thirteen, his family immigrated to Israel. Absorption into Israeli society and culture was overshadowed by hardships of dire austerity and personal tragedies, and the young boy was dissatisfied with his new life. Yearning to return to Iraq, he tried escaping to Lebanon at the age of fifteen. The Israeli authorities arrested, imprisoned, and tortured him. This episode left Naqqash with his obsession of leaving Israel and his yearning for a just world without borders and wars.

In 1958, he travelled extensively to Turkey, Persia, and India, where he encountered expatriate Iraqi Jewish communities; however, in 1962 he returned to Israel disappointed and disillusioned, because it seemed that any hope of social change and reform was elusive, if not impossible. His writings radiate this sense of helplessness, which is reflected in humanity’s limitations in the domains of science, technology, and philosophy.

His first works appeared in the Israeli Arabic newspaper *Al-Mirsad*.<sup>3</sup> In his first book of short stories, *The Mistake*, Naqqash (1971) largely conformed to the norms of Arabic literature at the time and did not introduce any far-reaching narrative innovations. However, in his second book *The Story of Every Time and Place* (Naqqash 1978a), he employed more sophisticated literary devices. Most of the stories in this book present characters whose psyches are dominated by warring irrational forces, which mirror their absurd external reality. Some address philosophical dilemmas that stem from human existence in a material world. The stories are universal, and they take place in any place and at any time. Furthermore, many of them have a surreal and demonic dimension (Snir 2008: 211).

## THE DEFORMATION AND DECLINE OF GOD AND THE AUTHORITATIVE FATHER FIGURE

In earlier times, religious faith built up a sense of security and protection from existential fear. But the loss of authority, a product of modernity, deeply troubles modern society, and no less the contemporary Jew. This loss stems from a weakening – or even vanishing – of belief in God, which exposes humanity to existential fear. The loss of faith has deprived people of comfort. Man yearns for a life that is sound and complete, but does not achieve it (Hajjar 2010: 278).<sup>4</sup>

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2 Naqqash translated *Hamlet* into Arabic purely for his own pleasure, and hence his translation has not been published. This translation is mentioned in Naqqash’s handwritten autobiography, which also has not been published. However, his wife Victoria kindly sent me a copy.

3 *Al-Mirsad* was the Arabic-language newspaper of the Israeli Mapam Party, which appeared between 1951 and 1979 as a daily, weekly, or bi-weekly, depending on the period.

4 For a treatment of the theme of loss of faith in Naqqash’s story “Tantal”, see Hajjar (2010).

The image of God as the supreme source of authority is closely linked to the image of the father as an authority figure, and the loss of God is thus linked to the weakening of the father figure.<sup>5</sup> An example of this loss of authority appears in Naqqāsh's story "The Death of Santa Claus", which is found in the collection *The Mistake* (Naqqāsh 1971: 15–45). The story is told from the perspective of the son, whose grown-up world is twisted and convoluted, whereas his early childhood was suffused with happiness and a sense of security and belonging (Snir 2008: 23–24). The story pivots around the collapse of the father, originally a strong, authoritative, and influential figure. To illustrate the extent of his father's influence, the son relates that he was able to force the dismissal of a schoolteacher hated by the children. The father also succeeded in persuading Santa Claus to give a present to Napoleon Kākū, a rejected boy whose filthy appearance disgusts his classmates, causing them to shun him.

Like Gregor's father in *The Metamorphosis*, this father changes dramatically following a decline in the family's financial situation. He suffers a profound mental breakdown, which undermines his authority as a father in his own eyes and in the eyes of those around him. When the children approach him one day to complain that Santa Claus did not give Napoleon Kākū a present that year, out of weakness and helplessness he remains silent. The author's (Naqqāsh 1971: 42) description of him reflects his deep depression: "In the large room, the father lay withdrawn, still in his night clothes, his face covered with short prickly hairs that had not seen the blade of a razor for several days."<sup>6</sup>

The father's physical and spiritual deterioration, which is accompanied by great anguish, eventually leads to his death. This spells the loss of security and certainty for his family, while the protagonist naturally experiences it as the end of an era – namely, his carefree childhood – and the beginning of a new life marked by anxiety, alienation, and defenselessness.

Another story that features the universal theme of friction between father and son is "The Jew", which appears in the collection *I, They and Ambivalence* (Naqqāsh 1978b: 191). The struggle between the father Yahūda al-A'jam and Sha'ul, his grown son, is characterized by mutual hatred and contempt. The father is described as a repugnant and greedy businessman who tries to dominate his son and bend him to his will. He objects to his son's friendship with their Muslim neighbors, and he rebukes him especially for his relations with Faṭūma, a married woman. Sha'ul claims that all of his father's warnings stem from a deep-seated sense of inferiority as a Jew and from a selfish fear for his own reputation. He therefore accuses him of hypocritical self-righteousness, calling him by contemptuous names such as "that idiot".

When Sha'ul is arrested for Zionist activism, he knows that his father is the only man who can arrange his release. However, he is reluctant to turn to him, for fear that his father will see this as proof of his superiority and use the opportunity to degrade him. "My father is the last man to

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5 The relationship between the two is reflected in interpretations of *Leviticus* 19:3: "Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths: I am the Lord your God" (English Standard Version, 2001). Jewish scholars have drawn a link between the two parts of the verse: "Revering one's father and mother is comparable to revering God" (Talmud, *Kiddushin* 30:72).

A distinct echo of Naqqāsh's life is also reflected in Kafka's experience. The latter regarded his father as a major influence in his life, not only as an authoritative figure but also as a domineering one: Kafka's father evoked a sense of inferiority that accompanied him throughout his life. He thus often portrayed himself as an eternal boy, forever helpless and powerless in his struggle against a despotic father. See Myers (1986: 82–96). For example, in *Dearest Father* Kafka (2008: 27–28) writes, "I was never able to understand your complete obliviousness to the kind of grief and shame you could inflict on me with your words and judgments, as if you had no idea of your power. [...] For me as a child, though, everything you barked at me was as good as God's law, I never forgot it".

6 All English translations from Naqqāsh's works are the author's.

whom I will turn for help, for he will use it to enslave me and then humiliate me” (Naqqāsh 1978b: 232). While in jail, the son becomes obsessed by a desire to know who informed the authorities about his involvement with the Zionist Movement and the Communist Party. He concludes that his father must know. Eventually, Yahūda confesses that he himself told the authorities, out of fear that illegal activities would lead Sha’ul to the gallows. The son listens to his father’s confession with astonishment, and his reaction is harsh. “Villain!” he shouts at him. “Get out before I get into more trouble by shedding my blood and yours” (Naqqāsh 1978b: 239).

“The Return”, a story in the collection *The Story of Every Time and Place* (Naqqāsh 1978a: 38–59), combines the themes of a struggle between man and God and a struggle between father and son. The son despises his father, calling him “a hateful old man”, and even denies that he is really his father. Feeling certain that he has managed to annihilate the old man, he is overtaken by a lust for domination, and this inner sense of power becomes a substitute for his lost faith in God.<sup>7</sup> He says:

This God that is seeped into my being, I have made many sacrifices to him [...] without ever seeing him. The one they called “God” and said that he dwelt in heaven, we refuse to recognize Him because He is invisible to us. (Naqqāsh 1978a: 51)

The story ends with a Kafkaesque metamorphosis: the son turns into an ape and paradoxically finds a new substitute father (Elimelekh 2013b: 323–342, esp. 326).<sup>8</sup> “There, in the middle of the troop [of apes], is a face with prominent fangs that reminds me of my real father” (Naqqāsh 1978a: 58).

A godless world is a world in which fathers become sons, sons become bugs and apes, and, in short, everything is stood on its head. The theme of an upside-down, evil world that forms the antithesis of a good and proper world is especially prominent in Naqqāsh’s (1995) “Topsy-Turvy World”, which appears in the collection *Prophecies of a Madman in a Cursed City*. This story (“Topsy-Turvy World”) tells of several villains who live in a city reminiscent of the Biblical Sodom. *Al-Kiyān al-’A’zam* (or the ‘Great Authority’), who in fact is God, decides to punish the residents and destroys the city just like Sodom and Gomorrah. The narrator hears a voice (similar to the one in “The Voice of the Whip and the Silence of the Creator”, another story in the same book), which tells him that there once existed a utopian city, the mirror opposite of Sodom (Naqqāsh 1995:89). Snir (2008: 238) argues that it seems that this utopian metropolis represents Baghdad, which has disappeared, while the cursed city Tel Aviv continues to thrive in the final decade of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

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7 Already by the age of eight, Naqqāsh had read *Arabian Nights*, which began an interest in existential and philosophical questions (Snir 2008: 202). In later life, existentialist claims about the death of God and demands that all individuals adopt for themselves the godlike role of being the sole originators of their own selves would resonate with Naqqāsh and appear throughout his oeuvre (Golomb 1995: 10).

8 Naqqāsh’s man-to-ape reverse-ending to “The Return” brings to mind Kafka’s (1971) short story “Report to an Academy”, in which an ape, Red Peter, becomes an honorary member of human society, after he adopts human behavior in order to avoid being locked up in a zoo. His transformation is not complete, however, for he does not cease to be an ape, even though he dresses and talks like a man. Red Peter is a tangible and ironic symbol of the tragic and grotesque state of modern society. His metamorphosis reflects the transformation that has occurred in the status of the academy and the decline of the civilization that the academy represents.

9 Tel Aviv appears in the title story of the collection *Prophecies of a Madman in a Cursed City*. Osman Hajjar (2010: p. 276) writes, “Thus the Exodus becomes a flight to Babylon, to Tel Abib, the place in southern Iraq where [the Prophet] Ezekiel settled – which in turn may be identified with the Israeli city bearing its name, Tel Aviv, in which the author concretely positions his modern prophet.” In other words, Naqqāsh posits a topsy-turvy exodus from a good place to an evil place.



The topos of a topsy-turvy world is prevalent in early Islamic apocalyptic traditions dealing with *'ishārāt al-sā'a* ('signs of the hour'), that is, signs heralding the coming of Judgment Day. These traditions speak of a world in which shepherds will be rulers, slaves will be masters, and so on. This theme has also been common in modern Arabic literature since the 1950s, and it has been used by authors to express criticism, especially socio-political critiques. Their point of departure is the desire for social order, that is, a commitment to an orderly world reflecting the inherent good that exists in the universe. Order necessarily entails authority, for someone must maintain it on a regular basis. An upside-down world is the antithesis of this order – a lawless world that requires urgent intervention to restore things to their previous state (Naqqāsh 1978a: 236–237).

In light of Snir's analysis, we can say that the first and foremost authority is the sacred, divine power, whose absence gives rise to chaos and the domination of the world by demonic forces. Human society also requires authority; in its absence, anarchy fills the vacuum, allowing negative and destructive forces to prevail. This message is conveyed in Naqqāsh's play *In His Absence*, the tale of a commercial company that sinks into chaos and corruption after being abandoned by its manager.

### THE CRISIS OF FAITH AND THE DEATH OF GOD – THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE SACRED AND THE DEMONIC

In *The Hidden Face of God*, Richard Elliot Friedman (1996: 201–202) writes that the twentieth century was characterized by a profound and conscious sense of God's absence. The resurgence of orthodoxy was, at least in part, a reaction to the coldness and terror that characterizes our age in the wake of the loss of God.<sup>10</sup>

Naqqāsh's works echo these ideas, for his stories are dominated by the theme of the death, or more accurately the absence, of God. In his stories, God does not vanish; His disappearance is not final. Instead He is sometimes transformed into a demonic figure, or else He remains present, but conceals himself from man, allowing demonic forces to control the world as they please.<sup>11</sup>

In Naqqāsh's "The Feast", which appears in *The Story of Every Time and Place*, this demonic dimension is very strong. The narrative opens with the funeral of a young girl. After the mourners leave, a being called Abu al-Waylāt ('Father of Disasters') appears, exhumes the body and prepares to feast on it. But another creature, al-Ja'ih ('the Destroyer'), comes and also wishes to partake of the meal. Presently a third being, al-'Aqra' ('the Bald One'), arrives on the scene. He not only eats the body, but also abuses it. Eventually all three die, and the story ends with the words, "Within the open grave, a maiden's bodiless head was grinning in vengeance" (Naqqāsh

10 Jacob Golomb (1995: 3–11) writes that the decline of the powerful and long-enduring ethos of objectivity, rationality, and enlightenment brought about the "twilight of the idols" and the "death of God", to use Nietzsche's terms, thus reopening issues of personal identity and meaning. With the death of God, man must take up the god-like role of authoring his own truth and his own self. As the theory of "pre-established harmony" between our thoughts and reality, guaranteed by God, fell into disfavor, the theory of the self-creation of the self and of our own authenticity gained favor.

11 *Deuteronomy* 31:18 says, "And I [God] will surely hide my face in that day because of all the evil that they have done, because they have turned to other gods." Some commentators interpret the hiding of the face as a withdrawal of providence or a delay of salvation. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772–1810) (1993: 66:3) interpreted it to mean a complete occlusion of God. The period he lived in saw the beginning of secularization among the Jewish people, which gradually deepened until, in modern times, God largely disappeared from their spiritual lives. Commenting on the Hebrew doubled-verb construction *haster astir*, which is used to convey the act of concealment in this verse, Rabbi Nachman explains that it denotes a binary act of concealment: God will not only conceal his face, but will conceal the act of concealment, so that people will not even know that God is missing from their lives.

1978a: 142). Snir (2008: 213) believes that the girl's corpse represents human society while the three monsters represent the three monotheistic religions, which have exploited humanity and corrupted it – an interpretation he claims was confirmed by Naqqāsh himself.

Naqqāsh (1980a) addresses the “death of God” in his story “The Day the World Conceived and Miscarried”, which appears in a collection by the same title. The story takes place in a Bombay synagogue on Yom Kippur, namely in a holy place and on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar.

The protagonist Sha'ul Hillel feels the distance between himself and “the merciful and compassionate” God growing wider and wider. He “suffers and groans under the black and unbearably heavy shadow that is flung across his being”, a shadow “as heavy as lead and as thick as the wall that separates him from God and from the Day of Atonement” (Naqqāsh 1980a: 37). Sha'ul tries to break through this wall, but instead of reaching God, he finds himself trapped in a world of evil spirits and “devils that wail in [his] soul” (Naqqāsh 1980a: 51–52).

Seeing himself surrounded by sinners, he asks God:

Is all of this according to Your will, or have You handed over the reins of the world to every corrupt looter? [...] This world of yours has become prey to a starved, ravenous beast [...] and I among them am like a worthless louse: lost, trampled, and humiliated. (Naqqāsh 1980a: 42)

Sha'ul begs God to save him from the demonic forces, beseeching Him again and again, “Cast your mercy upon me, God” (Naqqāsh 1980a: 53–54).

While an aging character named Ishāq 'Aydā loses himself in erotic fantasies about the boy praying next to him, Sha'ul tries to draw close to God, but in vain, for “between him and God there is a wall that must be broken” (Naqqāsh 1980a: 23). It is crucial that Sha'ul does not experience God as being absent; rather, “He appears like a figure gazing at him from the bottom of the sea. Deep waters lie between them” (Naqqāsh 1980a: 29). Sha'ul blames this on the man praying next to him, whose mumbling distracts him from his prayers and prevents him from achieving a sense of communion with God, but this is clearly not the real reason. Later, Sha'ul also discovers that his wife is being unfaithful to him, and he flees from the synagogue.

The reality described in the story is repulsive, sordid, and corrupt. Lillian Debi-Guri (2002: 582–583) writes:

The congregation, which is supposed to be a single, unified body, breaks apart, and the hour of one's communion with God becomes an hour of horror and fear. [...] The worlds of prayer, which embody the best part of the human spirit – the part that yearns for God – are no longer a source of life but rather showers of death in a reality whose inhuman aspects make a mockery of the yearning for God. [...] The human landscape of the Iraqi Jewish [community] in Bombay is only a metaphor for the general human condition and for questions that occupy all men in the modern world, whose existence is marked by a loss of protection and the loss of God.

Another story in the same collection, “In the House of Rags and Miracles”, likewise describes a reality in which almost everything sacred has become satanic. Authority is portrayed as fiendish and irrational; having turned its back on humanity, the sacred and divine authority remains behind a steel curtain. The story describes the life of Iraqi Jews in a *ma'abara* (transit camp of tents or huts for newly arrived immigrants in Israel), where degrading conditions threaten the residents' very humanity. It stresses the transformation that took place in the Iraqi Jewish community upon its arrival in Israel: the community's vision of pre-immigration reality, a “classical reality” characterized by God's presence and grace, was replaced by a devilish existence and a decline into inhuman depravity. The three main characters are two sisters (known only as “the younger sister” and “the elder sister”) and Menashe the ragman. The

sisters, though “dejected and exhausted”, feed Menashe and care for him. They represent the last remnant of the humane and wholesome conditions that had existed in Iraq. The wretched Menashe, on the other hand, embodies the Iraqi Jews’ post-immigration decline.

The story “In the House of Rags and Miracles” describes how demonic forces are unleashed when man puts himself in God’s place. They take the form of murderers, thieves, and horrifying creatures, whose victims are elderly and helpless people and even animals. By contrast, the two women in this story represent the sacred, the good, the pure, and the angelic, and they “fight the two forces of evil: human evil and Satan’s evil” (Naqqash 1980a: 79).

The narrator, who is a relative of the two sisters, searches for meaning in the hellish world of the Iraqi Jews, which is also the hell of modern society.

I searched and examined, read and investigated. I am doing this in our drifting world, which has killed God and returned to idol worship; a world whose skies have filled with flying saucers carrying unidentified creatures coming from unknown worlds; a world that has gone back to making human sacrifices to the Devil, and whose sons wander, embarking on insane journeys in search of a lost anchor...the absent God. (Naqqash 1980a: 87)

God’s absence has prompted man to look for a substitute, and that is reason. Naqqash (1995: 59) wrote, “Nothing exists but reason. [...] I worship you, reason, and bow before you, mind.” In the story, the narrator discusses this notion with another character, Dr. Green, “an expert on human sciences who grew up in a world that worships only reason and material things” (Naqqash 1980: 87). Paradoxically, she believes that the human being is much weaker than he or she can imagine, because certain natural forces are inaccessible to the human senses and reason.

Another seminal story in the same collection, “‘Abūsī, Lord of the Worlds”, features many of the central themes discussed in this article – the disappearance of God, the worship of reason, and the helplessness and wretchedness of man – but from a different perspective. The protagonist ‘Abūsī is a Muslim man who is a rebel and represents the demonic. Following the death of Badūr, the woman he admires, he becomes addicted to drugs and grapples with existentialist questions. He is stricken by delusions of grandeur and considers himself a god. His sense of power and superiority are put to the test when Shumel, the poultry seller, asks him for advice. Shumel is a simple person whose belief in God is naïve; he, therefore, embodies the sacred. Having vowed to kill a rooster that pecked out his eye, Shumel is looking for a way to extricate himself from his oath. He appeals to ‘Abūsī, believing him to be the only man who can help. ‘Abūsī says:

I became great in his eyes, a hook on which to pin his hopes. [...] I was the one to whom he turned, the one who held the key to solving his problem. His very existence lay in my hands. (Naqqash 1980a: 127)

‘Abūsī sympathizes with Shumel because he also experienced dark days when Badūr died, feeling that the heavens had forsaken him. He is determined to help Shumel. “No, I shall not send him away unaided. I shall take pity on him, as the heavens did not take pity on me, and I shall not forsake him as God forsook me” (Naqqash 1980a: 133).

‘Abūsī’s decision to help Shumel is a blatant act of defiance of God. Seeking a way to free Shumel from his oath, he wracks his brains for an idea “that even God would not think of”. Lillian Debi-Guri (2002: 591) writes:

‘Abūsī is dragged into a confrontation with God and into transgressing human boundaries. [...] In order to do this, he must draw close to the divine essence, and must prove his ability and resourcefulness by executing the rooster in a way that rivals God’s own level of expertise.



‘Abūsī believes that God is the Creator, but that He deliberately made him a weak and wretched being, enslaved by his impulses and unable to escape death. This is in concert with Naqqāsh’s view of God as “deadly, resourceful, and cruel” (Debi-Guri 2002: 577). While ‘Abūsī is one of the vile, impoverished, and filthy characters found in Naqqāsh’s works, unlike most of them he does not remain silent and does not accept his misery. His ability to defeat God gives him a sense of rebirth. “The pessimistic ‘Abūsī has died”, he says of himself (Naqqāsh 1980a: 137). Indeed, ‘Abūsī’s ambition is not merely a means of escaping his odious life, but escaping the human condition in general, which he experiences as a vicious cycle with no way out. The phrase “he kept wandering inside the innermost intestines” conveys his sense of suffocation and lack of freedom, as do the expressions “trap” and “magnetic circle” (Naqqāsh 1980a: 137).

The story involves a two-way metamorphosis: from man to god and then back to man again. ‘Abūsī yearns to transcend the earthly realm and attain divine splendor, but eventually he plummets back to the ground of human frailty. The moment he manages to “kill his reason” in order to escape his human limitations, he hears “a great voice, as searing as lightning”. This invisible presence, apparently representing the sacred essence of God, informs him that without his mind he cannot attain greatness. Sobered from his delusions of grandeur, he experiences a crisis of faith in man’s power. He metamorphoses from a god into a “mosquito”, and he is overwhelmed by a sense of emptiness, expressed by the words “abyss” and “wind”. He realizes that he has returned to his former, true dimensions.

In his conversation with God – described as a “voice” or as “a figure standing, riding, or floating in the air” – ‘Abūsī becomes a target of God’s mockery. God derides his attempts to penetrate the divine realm, and ‘Abūsī is gradually convinced that wishing to escape his humanness is futile. As he awakens from his delusions, he remembers the death of Badūr:

As she lay dying, the deception died and the dreams died with her. The entire world lay dying. [...] Badūr did not go to her grave alone. She took with her the masks and all the pink shrouds. The mummy’s shame was exposed, and it was as hideous as a nightmare. (Naqqāsh 1980: 151–152)

The divine voice also appears in the story “The Voice of the Whip and the Silence of the Creator” from the collection *Prophecies of a Madman in a Cursed City*. Published in 1995, about fifteen years after *The Day the World Conceived and Miscarried*, this collection reflects a deepening of Naqqāsh’s pessimism. The characters portrayed in it are no less dehumanized and demonic; even more so, they seem to be trapped in a vortex of corruption, lust, and impulsiveness that eventually pulls them down into total madness.

The protagonist and narrator in “The Voice of the Whip” believes that corruption, idolatry, and deception permeate the world, and he has a constant feeling of being surrounded by germs, snakes, and scorpions. Fearing that all this corruption will defile his mind and affect his sanity, he tries to keep himself in a state of spiritual and cognitive isolation – but to no avail. He despairs, “I sank into a malodorous quagmire of wretchedness. The stench of rotteness choked me and turgid waters surged around me from every direction” (Naqqāsh 1995: 75).

Two demonic figures of authority appear in the story: the protagonist’s ugly, domineering wife and the monster. The wife informs him that she means to beat him with a whip: “I made

you my husband [...] and here is the whip” (Naqqash 1995: 76).<sup>12</sup> From this moment onward, he becomes enslaved. He remains silent as she flogs him while screaming, “Say ‘I hear and obey!’” (Naqqash 1995: 76). His only means of escape from his enslavement is to flee into the world of his childhood, which he calls “my real freedom, which I have lost”. He explains, “Back then the way to God was short. I rushed to Him in secret, sometimes rebuking, sometimes yearning, sometimes beseeching and sometimes thankful” (Naqqash 1995: 77).<sup>13</sup> The sound of the tyrant’s whip makes him want to hear the voice of God thundering in the deep (another of Naqqash’s reversals, as God is usually associated with the heavenly heights) and shaking the world, filling it with majesty, justice, and mercy. “I had a mad yearning to hear the voice of God”, he says (Naqqash 1995: 75). However, he feels that this voice is “sealed into a bottle at the bottom of the ocean” (Naqqash 1995: 78).

In the second part of the story, the monster appears and charges the protagonist with the task of Sisyphus: to carry a rock to the top of a mountain, only to see it roll back down again. The protagonist says, “After midnight, bent under the weight of the rock, I took one last step before it repeated its endless tumble back into the abyss” (Naqqash 1995: 63). The allusion to the legend of Sisyphus is not incidental. Naqqash’s message is that absurdity, loneliness, deception, and alienation are man’s lot in life. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus (1964: 14) presents nature and the world as hostile to man, which is the source of alienation, existential absurdity, and an inability to understand the world. But, according to Camus, “the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus 1964: 123). Naqqash’s protagonist, however, is not happy. Unlike Camus’s Sisyphus, he is unable to free himself from bondage and from his grim inner reality. In short, he is incapable of being happy in a godless world.<sup>14</sup>

Eventually, the protagonist does manage to hear the voice of God – a disembodied but comprehensible voice that fills the entire world. His confusion and terror vanish, only to be replaced by a divine sense of calm. But a whip lash from the monster, demanding that he get back to work, puts an end to his spiritual bliss. The story juxtaposes the demonic voice of the whip, wielded by a tyrannical and enslaving authority, with the sacred and heavenly voice of God, who is nearly unattainable in an idol-worshipping world.

Corruption and madness come to a climax in the collection’s title story, “Prophecies of a Madman in a Cursed City”, which is rich in Biblical allusions. As in the previous story, the protagonist yearns to return to the original, sacred God. Moreover, this protagonist also lives in alienating surroundings and is subject to several sources of authority. The first is the divine

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12 An analogous scene appears in Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. One day before the fateful murder in the story, Raskolnikov dreams of some drunken peasants beating a weak old mare to death. They flog her until she collapses “from the blows of the three whips which were showered upon her like hail”. An old man watching this is outraged, and he asks the owner of the horse, “Are you a Christian, you devil?” Killing, then, is associated with the Devil, whereas mercy and humanity are associated with God. Towards the end of the novel, Raskolnikov tells Sonia, “I want to prove one thing only, that the Devil led me on then” (Dostoyevsky 1956: 52–53, 377).

13 The theme of yearning for the past and for childhood is paramount in Naqqash’s stories. His perception of childhood is tragic, for he sees it as a lost paradise. This is evident in the story “The Death of Santa Claus”, discussed above, and also in another story, “Willow Night” (see below). In the latter story, the narrator describes his childhood as “overflowing with warmth and happiness”, believing that he was surrounded by the wings of angels. But he also stresses that those days are gone, referring to them as his “dead childhood”, a paradoxical term, since childhood is generally associated with life’s beginning, not with death (Naqqash 1980a: 163).

14 In another Naqqash story, “This Logic”, which appears in the collection *Prophecies of a Madman in a Cursed City*, the narrator says, “God is nothing, I am nothing, everything is nothing” (Naqqash 1995: 59).

Creator, for whom he yearns and to whom he offers his total submission by saying *hineni* ('Here am I'). This is the response uttered by the Biblical Abraham before God asks him to sacrifice Isaac (*Genesis 22:1, 11*).<sup>15</sup> The protagonist in our story is also forced to say *hineni* to his demonic earthly masters: his wife Gomer, his children, his psychiatrist, an old man, and a "midget-giant", whom he calls his "second god".

The protagonist experiences a divine revelation in which God addresses him as "Son of Man" – an intertextual allusion to Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (*Ezekiel 37:1–14*). However, unlike Ezekiel, what he sees is not a hopeful vision of resurrection but rather a nightmarish vision of incest, idol worship, and unbridled lust.

"What do you see in the vast wasteland around you?" [the Lord asked]. I freed myself from the grip of Gomer, of my children, of the gullible old man, of my psychiatrist, and finally even of the midget-giant. [...] I cast my eyes over the wasteland and was horrified at what I saw. I whispered to my Lord, hardly hearing my own dying, whispering voice, "I see a wasteland, Lord, full of corpses: dead men and women, naked as on the day they were born, their shame exposed. And lo! The naked corpses arise. The men, my Lord, seek out the women and the women seek out the men. I see them lusting after flesh. [...] Fathers are not ashamed to copulate with their daughters and sisters with their brothers. [...] I see the heavens, Your heavens, raining gold, and everyone rushes forth [to collect it]. [...] Without waiting to wash themselves of the corruption [of the grave], they rush toward the showers of gold. [...] A man who just copulated with his sister now sinks his claws into her to tear the gold out of her hands, and a woman who just copulated with her father now closes her fingers around his throat until he faints. [...] Lord, in an eye-blink the gold is formed into a calf, and now they dance around it yelling, chortling and fornicating." (Naqqāsh 1995: 14–15)

God instructs the protagonist to take Gomer for a wife, even though he is sterile. This is a clear allusion to the prophet Hosea, who is thus instructed by God:

Go, take yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord. So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim. (*Hosea 1:2–3*)

Hosea prophesied at a time of great crisis for the people of Israel, foreseeing its impending destruction. The command to take "a wife of whoredom" lent personal poignancy to his prophecy. Having himself experienced betrayal by his own flesh, he could more effectively rebuke the people of Israel for betraying their God. Naqqāsh's story likewise describes a reality in which people betray the Creator by choosing to emulate the Devil instead of Him: "I created you in my image, but you disobeyed Me and refused to be cast in My image" (Naqqāsh 1995: 26).

The story indeed deals with the Devil, as well as with God. *Ecclesiastes 7:14* says, "God made the one as well as the other", meaning that, for everything He created, God also created

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15 Snir (2008: 203) observes that Naqqāsh's stories reflect a broad education and familiarity with the philosophical schools, especially existentialism and surrealism. Therefore, we might suggest a link to Kierkegaard (1983: 30, 53), who considers the story of the sacrifice of Isaac to be a tremendous paradox that can transform the act of murder into a holy act that is pleasing to God – for faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off.

an opposite.<sup>16</sup> According to Jewish tradition, God also created Satan, who in Jewish sources is called the *Sitra Akhra* ('the other side'). Satan tries to impose his authority and control over people, and he is successful when people are in a state of weakness and distant from God.

In the story, Satan's camp is represented by the protagonist's family, as well as by the midget-giant, the psychiatrist, and the greedy old man. Gomer is described as a malodorous "witch with rapacious fangs" who sucks the protagonist's blood. The four-year-old son stabs him with a knife and commands him to listen to Gomer, and the five-year-old daughter primps in front of the mirror, suggesting her future promiscuity. The old man – "a monster in whom tremendous evil has vanquished the frailty of a centenarian" – owes his life to the protagonist, but instead of being grateful he humiliates and tyrannizes him. The psychiatrist wants to hospitalize the protagonist, who is able to flee. The story ends with the protagonist trapped in a state of obsessive paranoia, like his counterpart in the story "The Day the World Conceived and Miscarried".

Finally, in "Faith", found in the collection *The Mistake* (Naqqāsh 1971), the protagonist is a Jewish ritual slaughterer (*shochet*), Ya'qūb. When he buys sheep for the Jewish community from the Muslim butcher Jabbār, some of the sheep turn out to be non-kosher because they are diseased, compelling him to return them. Jabbār rebukes him:

You return the slaughtered animals to me, as though every animal God created is forbidden! I don't care if your (chosen) people can only eat (chosen) sheep.<sup>17</sup> To me they are all the same. The more you fling (unchosen) meat back at me, the more harm you cause me, because a butcher like myself cannot sell all his meat at the market. Therefore it remains, and is a burden to me. Had you not been a religious man, I would have raised my voice at you. But out of respect for your beard, I remain patient, in hope that you will show me some consideration. (Naqqāsh 1971: 52)

This rebuke worries Ya'qūb, but his piety is greater than his fear of Jabbār. He continues to return many of the sheep he buys, until one day the butcher loses his patience and starts to make threats:

You all witnessed that I was patient with this old dog,<sup>18</sup> until the entire world lost its patience. The remedy for one who has no respect for decency is this: I swear by God that, from this day onwards, if you reject a sheep and throw it back at me, I will slaughter you in such a way that even the dogs will not touch your carcass. (Naqqāsh 1971: 58)

Terrified by the butcher's death threats, Ya'qūb is plunged into an intense conflict between his faith and his fear. Eventually fear wins out, and he decides to pronounce that all the sheep meat

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16 *Leviticus* 16:8 says, "And Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel". Jewish scholars said the two goats must be similar in size and appearance, for they are proof that good and evil were both created by God ("God made the one as well as the other") and can therefore resemble one another: defilement often seems like holiness and falsehood like truth. The Ramban (Nachmanides) and other exegetes argued that the sacrifice of the goat to Azazel (i.e. the Devil) is intended to appease him, so that he does not speak ill of the children of Israel. The *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* argues, in a similar vein, that the goat sacrificed to Azazel (i.e. the scapegoat) becomes an advocate for the children of Israel. Rabbi Zadok HaKohen Rabinowitz of Lublin writes in his essay "Tzidkat Hatzadik" that the sacrifice of the scapegoat demonstrates the proper attitude toward evil in the world. Noting that this sacrifice is divinely ordained, he argues that this is what turns this strange act – a sacrifice to the Devil – into a virtuous act. Some believe that the word *se'irim* ('goats') in *Isaiah* 13:21 – "But wild animals will lie down there, and their houses will be full of howling creatures; there ostriches will dwell, and there wild goats will dance" – actually refers to horned and hoofed demons, and that the scapegoat is sent to join them.

17 The parentheses are in the original.

18 As a derogatory term for a Jew, "dog" is part of the anti-Semitic lexicon that was shaped over generations in different parts of the world. In his story "Investigations of a Dog", Kafka uses this pejorative as the basis of a logical argument that demonstrates the stupidity and absurdity of the slur. (Loeb 2001: 203)

is kosher. And his religious and moral decline leads him to commit yet another sin: after Jabbār tricks him and seduces his wife, Ya‘qūb has illicit relations with Jabbār’s wife.

The Arabic word *thughrah* (‘breach’), which recurs in this story and in other short stories by Naqqāsh, symbolizes man’s lustfulness. Ya‘qūb spends his life trying to overcome his impulses, but Jabbār’s wife Fatima comes along and reopens the breach in his defenses. As he succumbs to his lust, his faith weakens as well. His struggle with his instincts is a struggle between faith in God and capitulation to the Devil:

The breach in his head, which he tried to seal in order to keep his faith from failing and to keep himself from slipping even further, was reopened, and he could not resist it. From [the opening] rose the stench of the filth in his mind. (Naqqāsh 1971: 56–57)<sup>19</sup>

Eventually Jabbār murders Ya‘qūb for his infraction, and the story ends with a description of his death:

Suddenly...he remembered God...He wrung out the essence of his being, trying to fling it at the heavens and cry out for help, but his faith was...weak...and he faded away along with his consciousness...slowly...slowly. (Naqqāsh 1971: 58)

The reality described in the story is unquestionably grim. Although set in a specific time and place, its reality is universal and applies to all men, not only to Jews. Jabbār represents those with power and authority, who intimidate and persecute anyone who refuses to comply with their wishes.

At the same time, the story obviously does deal with Jewish themes. The “chosen sheep” mentioned by Jabbār represent the Jewish people. Naqqāsh describes Jewish life in exile as an unstable existence between two different cultures and moral codes. He likens Jews to sheep, who are allowed to graze only in order to produce wool and meat. Jabbār, on the other hand, is described as a bestial and demonic being who slaughters the sheep – Ya‘qūb – after subjecting him to a series of torments. The pious Ya‘qūb knows that all of the disasters that befall him are a punishment for his sins, especially his sin of causing the Jewish community to eat non-kosher meat. Ya‘qūb feels that he is trapped in the claws of the Devil – represented by Jabbār and his wife – yet he is too weak to fight these powerful figures. He loses his God and, consequently, he also loses his life.

The struggle between Ya‘qūb and Jabbār is more than a personal conflict: it is the heroic struggle between Jacob – forefather of the Jewish people – and the angel,<sup>20</sup> which, according to some interpretations, symbolizes the historic Jewish struggle.<sup>21</sup> Naqqāsh’s story addresses the decline of faith among Jews of the Diaspora as a result of the painful reality of their life in other nations, which is

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19 The theme of stench recurs in Naqqāsh’s stories (for example, see “The Voice of the Whip and the Silence of the Creator”, mentioned above), and it symbolizes spiritual corruption. It also recurs in the works of Arab writers, such as ‘Abd Al-Raḥman Munīf in his novel *East of the Mediterranean* (“The world was small, wet and always reeking of toilets.”), and it is a theme that appears throughout Egyptian writer Ṣun‘Allāh ‘Ibrāhīm’s novel *That Smell*, which focuses on a political prisoner. In this book, foul odors are the protagonist’s constant companion. Arising from the sweaty bodies of the prisoners in the detention cell, from dusty roads, from overflowing sewers, and from the protagonist’s own body, they symbolize the corruption of the world and of human society, which causes the protagonist to feel alienated from his surroundings.

20 Appropriately, Jabbār’s name means ‘tyrant’ or ‘despot’, but it also means ‘hero’ and is one of the names of God in the Muslim tradition.

21 In *Genesis* 32:24, Jacob encounters a “man” who wrestles with him throughout the night: “And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.” Jewish scholars argued that the “man” is an angel, and that Jacob’s fight with him symbolizes the historic struggle between the Jewish people and the other nations that have persecuted the Jews and tried to lead them away from God’s path. This struggle is the Jews’ lot in the exilic period, which is likened to night and ends with “the breaking of the day” (Leibowitz 1977: 366–369).



replete with conflict, hatred, and anxiety.<sup>22</sup> However, Naqqāsh regards exile as a universal state as well as a Jewish one: all men feel alienated and trapped, experiencing guilt and a desire to flee.<sup>23</sup>

In Naqqāsh's works, the feeling of exile is expressed through the contradiction of two worlds: his childhood in Iraq, representing a world that no longer exists, and his present life in Israel.<sup>24</sup> In his mind, the author wanders between the land of Israel and Iraq, between here and there. His longing for the old world is also a longing for the Jewish tradition, or as his sister Samīra says:

We kept the holidays and the customs. For him tradition was associated with romanticism. He was a romantic, and for him tradition was a longing for the life he had in Baghdad before he emigrated to Israel. (Livneh 2004)

For Naqqāsh, loss of tradition at its core meant the demise of the authority of the father figure – and, by extension, God's authority. This loss elicits fear on one hand and anger on the other.

Naqqāsh's protagonists defy the Supreme Authority, whether out of a conscious desire to rebel (as in the case of the character 'Abūsī), or out of fear (as in the case of Ya'qūb). That is, they defy and violate the laws of the Supreme Authority, but ultimately they are forced to admit their insignificance compared to the might of God.

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The works of Naqqāsh attest to the absurdity and anguish of human existence in the modern era – an existence without meaning, purpose or providence. We have proposed that Naqqāsh describes a dichotomous reality, one in which the sacred divinity is present but occluded, leaving the world to be controlled by demonic forces. Man in this picture is not innocent, for he is complicit in the destruction or upending of the world that is wrought by these demonic forces. Naqqāsh also plumbs the depths of the human psyche and describes a world dominated by these two opposing forces.

In the story "Willow Night" (Naqqāsh 1980b: 159–226), in terms of place the reader is presented with two antagonistic worlds: the sacred and the demonic. "Willow Night" took place in Baghdad on the seventh day (*Hoshana Rabbah*) of the Jewish festival of Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles). The story ends with the words of the narrator about his uncle, whose loss of

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22 Muklif Hamad Mudhi (1988: 422) argues that the main message of this story is that Jewish religious law should change to fit the times and the needs of society, and that Jews should avoid conflict with the surrounding society to whom their customs seem strange. Mudhi's interpretation stresses the Jews' status as aliens among non-Jews.

23 In *Franz Kafka: A Question of Jewish Identity*, Sarah Loeb (2001: 148–149, 157) argues that Kafka's stories describe three different worlds. The first and most dominant is the world of those who have authority or power, either metaphysical or human. The second is the world of the majority, those who are reconciled to the rule of the Supreme Authority and lead submissive and shallow lives. The third is the world of the individualist, who defies the Supreme Authority and challenges its principles, but at the same time is drawn to this authority and eventually submits completely to its power. Many of Naqqāsh's protagonists – and indeed he himself – bear a strong resemblance to Kafka's protagonists in Loeb's third category.

24 By producing works in Arabic, Naqqāsh gave expression to the alienation towards Hebrew that he felt shortly after his arrival in Israel. He saw it as the language of the Zionist Movement, which – or so he claimed – was partially to blame for the ruined lives of thousands of Baghdadi Jews. However, Somekh (1983: 46) considers Hebrew to be the strongest and most stable national component in Israeli society. As Reuven Snir (2008: 202) notes, "When the State of Israel was founded Naqqāsh was filled with national pride, but this feeling was dashed to pieces after he came to Israel, due to the economic and social crisis that beset his family. He declared at every opportunity that Arabic was his first language and that he would continue to write in it, although he also tried to write in Hebrew, without success." Snir continues, "Naqqāsh's relationship with the Hebrew language is a complex issue because of his own contradictory statements."

faith leads to a loss of direction, perhaps his identity, and certainly his home (Berg 1996: 125). The uncle spends the night of *Hoshana Rabbah* in a café instead of his flimsily built *sukkah*:

My uncle capitulated, while we lit the candle. We lit it within our souls and we committed ourselves. We swore that its light would drive away all the darkness and shine forth. We lit it and promised to keep [swimming] against this cursed, foul and sweeping current. We will go on without hesitation. We will continue to love, and will not feel hate. [...] We will never succumb to the beast. (Naqqash 1980b: 226)

This passage describes the great contrast between the lost paradise of Iraq, which was full of pure light, religious faith, and a sense of security, and the reality of Israel, dark and monstrous. In other words, the past represents the sacred and the present the demonic. The very mention of “paradise” immediately evokes its opposite, Hell, whose denizens are demonic.

Another of Naqqash’s critiques of Israel is his drama *The Chilly People*. The play revolves around four main characters who live in a castle: the master who is a scientist, the maiden who seeks justice and tries to help “the chilly people”, the servant, and the donkey. The four chilly people inhabit a cave. As the story opens, the master is successfully using his science to turn the donkey into a sentient, talking being. One day the donkey discovers the cave and tells his master about its inhabitants. The master, who is awaiting a savior, refuses to believe that the chilly people will come. Eventually, however, the chilly people leave their cave and march to the master’s castle.

The chilly people represent Iraqi Jews living in a lowly, cold, inhospitable “cave”, which is the symbol of an early Israeli immigrant transition camp, the *ma’abara*. The castle on high represents the State of Israel, the Promised Land, while the donkey (representing magic) and the maiden (just rewards) reflect the state of those who return. In a way, the master awaiting a savior is himself a savior, albeit a minor and imperfect reflection of one. He epitomizes the founders of Israel, the Ashkenazi Zionist leaders, who denigrated the non-European immigrants. The intelligent donkey may be an assimilated oriental Jew, whose knowledge of the castle people and the chilly people enables him to act as a mediator between the cave dwellers and the leadership.<sup>25</sup> And the maiden conforms to an enlightened Israeli official, who sees but is powerless to end the suffering and humiliation of the chilly people.

Hence, Naqqash’s message would seem to suggest that a violation of the natural human order is a necessary phase on the way to true salvation. In such an allegory as *The Chilly People*, Naqqash visualizes the true redemption of Iraqi Jewry as a model of redemption for all mankind.

In light of the above, it should be stressed that Naqqash felt highly disappointed and dissatisfied with Zionism, but not necessarily with Israel itself. He regarded the Zionist enterprise as a political-secular manifestation of traditional Judaism that could not fulfill his particular needs, for he yearned for a healthier and more authentic brand of Judaism. Naqqash did derive a sense of national pride from the establishment of the State of Israel. However, this feeling was shattered upon his arrival there, due to the economic and social crisis experienced by his family. He never considered himself part of the Zionist community struggling against an outside enemy.

Yet Naqqash did see himself as a Jew, one who chose to write in Arabic. Unlike many of the Jewish Iraqi authors, until the 1970s he focused on Jewish characters and issues, and he avoided any attempt to blur his religious identity (Snir 2008: 202, 204, 207). He grappled with the paradox of Jewish life that is disconnected from its Jewish religious roots.

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<sup>25</sup> This donkey doubtlessly alludes to Balaam’s donkey, who is the first to see the angel and with God’s gift of speech mediates between the God’s angel and his master Balaam. (*Numbers* 22:22ff)

At the same time, his treatment of various issues – including authority – is universal: he saw himself not only as a Jew, but also as an individual coming to grips with universal existential questions. Hence, his works have both a local, Jewish aspect and a general, human outlook. His works tend to expose a deep distress and existential fear stemming, *inter alia*, from the loss of faith. Naqqāsh personally experienced changes that occurred in the life of the Jewish people and in the wider world during the twentieth century. He devoted his life's work to alerting both worlds to the harmful effects that godlessness and the crumbling of authority could have on the future of humanity.

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