

## An (im)probable encounter at a Bet Midrash

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Men of various confessions and lines of work are united by a city, even if they lived there more than 150 years ago. Of course, even in half a century, cities change to the point of being unrecognizable, and in Buchach, there is a building that could have been seen by the two men whose pseudonyms we know better than their real names.

Around 1750 Johann Georg Pinsel created the sculptural decorations for City Hall that Shmuel Yosef Agnon, in his novel *A Guest for the Night* (1939), stubbornly avoided naming even once. Suspicion around the specific features of this "figure of silence" arises because both the Great Synagogue and the attached bet midrash, toward which the author's main alter ego constantly heads, were located directly across the street from City Hall. I presume that the physical proximity of the Jewish temples to those images, which are generally

banned in Judaism, were an affront to the writer. So, he decided to destroy symbolically Pinsel and Meretyń's masterpiece in the only way possible: by enveloping it in a thick silence, impenetrable as the darkness of night.



*Near the walls of the chapel of the church of Ascension in Buchach.*

It is hardly likely that at the start of the twentieth century, the writer entered the temples of Gentiles in the city (the Roman Catholic church, the Greek Catholic monastery, Orthodox churches). Furthermore, he defiantly ignored City Hall, the embodiment of the municipal authorities. But what about Pinsel, the artist? Did he, a baptized person, have the right in the mid-eighteenth century to spend time freely in, for example, the reading hall of the bet midrash, in order to take a peek at (or paint) the men and women holding books, reading them aloud or to themselves, commenting, and arguing about what they have read or heard?

In Pinsel's works, the image of books is quite strange. Both Elizabeth, the mother of the Forerunner, and Anna, the mother of the Mother of God and Anna the prophetess, who prophesied the first presentation of Jesus at the temple, as well as some forefathers, are holding books of an excessively large size. The immense *Grossbücher* in their hands, with their long fingers and refined, slender wrists, look like

a collection of pages that tremble and bulge, twist and deform, as though they will crumble any minute, and fall apart from the action either of the wind or the extraordinary emotions of those who are reading and commenting on them. In the relief composition, *Twelve-Year-Old Jesus at the Temple of Jerusalem* (1758, designed for the ambon [elevated platform where the Scriptures are read—Trans.] of the church in Hodovytsia), eight Jewish teachers with entirely recognizable Semitic features, at the moment when Christ addresses them, interpret His words excitedly, comparing them to what is written in the books. The figures of the teachers closest to the viewer are placed in such a way as to focus attention on an index finger that almost imperiously pokes at a page, and on the prominent forehead with dramatically raised eyebrows on a face that bends over the open and twisted pages, in order to peer at the lines of the text.



*Houses in the Jewish quarter of the city, near the destroyed synagogue..*

Where could the artist have found the prototypes of these ecstatic Jews? Most likely in the reading room of the Buchach bet midrash, observing the palette of emotions during the interpretation of the Torah or the Kabbalah. Galicia in the mid-eighteenth century did not have other places that could have been used as "public libraries." Of course, Pinsel also portrayed Christians. In his representation of Athanasius the Great, the patron of the Sheptytsky family, placed to the right of the entrance to St. George's Cathedral in Lviv, the sculptor portrays him with a similarly huge manuscript. For him, the "People of the Book" was a concept that united Jews and Christians. For neither in the times when Jesus was born nor in the early years of Christianity as a state religion did paper books in the usual form of a codex, let alone of such a gigantic size, did exist yet. However, during the Age of Enlightenment, yes — and they were produced in Galician printing houses.



*View of the Town Hall in Buchach.*

There is no doubt that books were extremely important to Agnon as well. He was heartbroken by the two fires that consumed his personal libraries. When he was visiting Buchach and writing *A Guest for the Night*, books were already being burned on bonfires in the squares of Germany. The idea that a book can change the world, a book that can be seen in Pinsel's work as a reflection of mystical Hasidism, has reached a tragic limit.

The Buchach bet midrash, when the writer was given the key to it, may still contain the books that Pinsel looked at long ago.

This is where their eyes met.

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All the mentioned works can be viewed on the website of the [PinselAR](#) project.

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