

In The Land of Oz

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An Argument on Life and Death (A)

A Tale of Love and Darkness

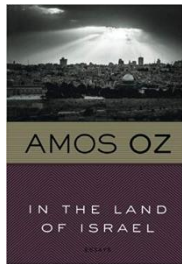
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In The Land of Israel

An Argument on Life and Death (A)

Yisrael Harel, chairman of the Council of Jewish Settlements in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza, and editor of its newspaper, Nekuda, is a journalist by profession, a graduate of Bnai Akiva, the religious youth movement, and one of the central activists in Gush Emunim. He arrived in Ofra with his family a year and a half after the founders. Yisrael is an agreeable man, reflective, soft-spoken, a receptive listener. In the last few months, he says, since the evacuation of Yammit and the war in Lebanon, positions have polarized. The faith of those who believe in the path of Gush Emunim has been strengthened. The conviction of its opponents has deepened. Gush Emunim, Yisrael maintains, was born out of a deep residue of inferiority feelings among religious Zionist youth, accumulated over many years, toward the socialist Zionist movement's "Land of Israel." The nationalist religious camp used to be essentially an imitation of the Labor movement. It was only with the first breach by the students from Rabbi Kook's yeshiva in Jerusalem that a new style, a new outlook, even a new fashion were born. And the frustrated spiritual energies that had been dwarfed by the kibbutzim and the leftist youth movements found independent channels only after the Six-Day War, "when portions of the Land of Israel were liberated." Since the Six-Day War, if not before then, Yisrael Harel posits, an "eclipse" has descended on the Labor movement: it has been gnawed at by vacillation, doubt, weakness, perhaps by its own feelings of guilt at the victory, and, in short, the spirit expressed in *The Seventh Day: Soldiers Talk*, which was published immediately after that war. Into the spiritual vacuum entered fiery, enthusiastic graduates of Bnai Akiva and disciples of Rabbi Kook's yeshiva. They had no doubts, from the moment the Six-Day War ended, about what had to be done in the "liberated Land of Israel." And they were, indeed, the spearhead of fulfillment in the liberated territories, sweeping others along after them. But in recent months, as a result of the destruction of the Yammit region and the war in Lebanon, the "dovish left" again finds itself on the offensive, while Gush Emunim and its followers have been pushed into a defensive position. "How shall I put it . . . there is a sort of weight upon us, a fear that the price for what we did in Lebanon will be paid in Judea and Samaria. Our leftist opponents apparently feel it, too, and that's why they have opened a general assault. Only a few of us understood properly what the chief of staff said about the war in Lebanon ('This is a war over the Land of Israel!'). It was precisely the left who grasped it, perhaps subconsciously. And I, too, see it that way." So, the situation forces the "faithful of the Land of Israel" to rally around Begin and Sharon, in spite of the open wound of the Yammit evacuation. "But there are more than a few doubts within our camp. They are not exclusive to the less determined in the National Religious Party. We have reached the time to take stock of our souls. And perhaps there is a need to establish a dialogue between the two sides of the barricades." I ask Yisrael Harel where he thinks the major barricade stands in the Land of Israel right now. He is silent for a long while before he replies, "With a number of reservations, and only for the sake of brevity, I'll put it this way: the major barricade is the one that

divides the Jews from the Israelis. The Jews are those who want to live, to one degree or another, in accordance with the Bible. The Israelis pay lip service, maybe, to the heritage, but in essence they aspire to be a completely new people here, a satellite of Western culture. For many of those Israelis the Land of Israel is no more than a "biographical accident." As it happens, they make a decent living here, but if they were offered a better job somewhere else, abroad, they'd simply pack up and move. Eretz Yisrael means very little to them. "I think that the positions of Gush Emunim really do constitute an irritating and alarming threat to the legitimacy of this secular, hedonistic 'Israeli-ism.' The existence of Gush Emunim disturbs your experience of modern Western existence, including permissiveness and pacifism and internationalism; it interferes with your attempt to 'adjust' our society to fashionable West-era values. You have been trapped by a multifaceted threat: First of all, in terms of Zionist fulfillment, you are no longer the pioneers. Second, you've been tangled up in a war you don't really believe in. Third, what you view as injustice is being done to the Arabs in your name. "All of this becomes even more complicated, in your terms, because Begin has won two elections and you have been trounced. For those reasons you tend to confuse the spiritual struggle with settling political accounts, and spiritual poverty with the loss of power positions.

Oz, Amos. In the Land of Israel (p. 116). Mariner Books. Kindle Edition.

3. A Telephone Conversation at the Pharmacy

For years we had a regular arrangement for a telephonic link with the family in Tel Aviv. We used to phone them every three or four months, even though we didn't have a phone and neither did they. First of all we used to write to Auntie Hayya and Uncle Tsvi to let them know that on, say, the nineteenth of the month, which was a Wednesday, and on Wednesdays Tsvi left his work at the Health Clinic at three, so at five we would phone from our chemist's to their chemist's. The letter was sent well in advance, and then we waited for a reply. In their letter, Auntie Hayya and Uncle Tsvi assured us that Wednesday the nineteenth suited them perfectly, and they would be waiting at the chemist's a little before five, and not to worry if we didn't manage to phone on the dot of five, they wouldn't run away. I don't remember whether we put on our best clothes for the expedition to the chemist's, for the phone call to Tel Aviv, but it wouldn't surprise me if we did. It was a solemn undertaking. As early as the Sunday before, my father would say to my mother, Fania, you haven't forgotten that this is the week that we're phoning to Tel Aviv? On Monday my mother would say, Arieh, don't be late home the day after tomorrow, don't mess

things up. And on Tuesday they would both say to me, Amos, just don't make any surprises for us, you hear, just don't be ill, you hear, don't catch cold or fall over until after tomorrow afternoon. And that evening they would say to me, go to sleep early, so you'll be in good shape for the phone call, we don't want you to sound as though you haven't been eating properly. So they would build up the excitement. We lived in Amos Street, and the chemist's shop was five minutes' walk away, in Zephaniah Street, but by three o'clock my father would say to my mother: 'Don't start anything new now, so you won't be in a rush.' 'I'm perfectly OK, but what about you with your books, you might forget all about it.' 'Me? Forget? I'm looking at the clock every few minutes. And Amos will remind me.' Here I am, just five or six years old, and already I have to assume a historic responsibility. I didn't have a watch – how could I? – and so every few moments I ran to the kitchen to see what the clock said, and then I would announce, like the countdown to a spaceship launch: twenty-five minutes to go, twenty minutes to go, fifteen to go, ten and a half to go – and at that point we would get up, lock the front door carefully, and set off, the three of us, turn left as far as Mr. Auster's grocery shop, then right into Zechariah Street, left into Malachi Street, right into Zephaniah Street, and straight into the chemist's to announce: 'Good afternoon to you Mr. Heinemann, how are you? We've come to phone.' He knew perfectly well, of course, that on Wednesday we would be coming to phone our relatives in Tel Aviv,

Father would say: 'I'll dial now.' And Mother said: 'It's too soon, Arieh. There's still a few minutes to go.' He would reply: 'Yes, but they have to be put through' (there was no direct dialing at that time). Mother: 'Yes, but what if for once we are put through right away, and they're not there yet?' Father replied: 'In that case we shall simply try again later.' Mother: 'No, they'll worry, they'll think they've missed us.' While they were still arguing, suddenly it was almost five o'clock. Father picked up the receiver, standing up to do so, and said to the operator: 'Good afternoon, Madam.

Would you please give me Tel Aviv 648. (Or something like that: we were still living in a three-digit world.) Sometimes the operator would answer: 'Would you please wait a few minutes, Sir, the Postmaster is on the line.' Or Mr. Sitton. Or Mr. Nashashibi. And we felt quite nervous: whatever would they think of us? I could visualize this single line that connected Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and via Tel Aviv with the rest of the world. And if this one line was engaged, we were cut off from the world. The line wound its way over wastelands and rocks, over hills and valleys, and I thought it was a great miracle. I trembled: what if wild animals came in the night and bit through the line? Or if wicked Arabs cut it? Or if the rain got into it? Or there was a fire? Who could tell? There was this line winding along, so vulnerable, unguarded, baking in the sun, who could tell. I felt full of gratitude to the men who had put up this line, so brave-hearted, so dexterous, it's not so easy, to put up a line from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv.

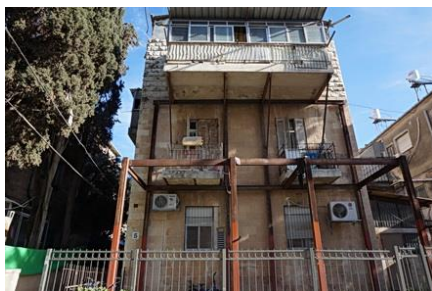
After waiting a while, Father decided that the Postmaster or Mr. Nashashibi must have finished talking, and so he picked up the receiver again and said to the operator: 'Excuse me, Madam, I believe I asked to be put through to Tel Aviv 648.' She would say: 'I've got it written down, Sir. Please wait' (or 'Please be patient'). Father would say: 'I am waiting, Madam, naturally I am waiting, but there are people waiting at the other end too.' This was his way of hinting to her politely that although we were indeed cultured people, there was a limit to our endurance. We were well brought up people, but we weren't suckers. We were not to be led like sheep to the slaughter. That idea - that you could treat Jews any way you felt like - was over, once and for all. Then all of a sudden the phone would ring there in the chemist's, and it was always such an exciting sound, such a magical moment, and the conversation went something like this: 'Hallo Tsvi?' 'Speaking.' 'It's Arie' here, in Jerusalem.' 'Yes Arie' here, hallo, it's Tsvi here, how are you?' 'Everything is fine here. We're speaking from the chemist's.' 'So are we. What's new?' 'Nothing new here. How about at your end, Tsvi? Tell us how it's going.' 'Everything is OK.

Nothing special to report. We're all well.' 'No news is good news. There's no news here either. We're all fine. How about you?' 'We're fine too.' 'That's good. Now Fania wants to speak to you.' And then the same thing all over again. How are you? What's new? And then: 'Now Amos wants to say a few words.' And that was the whole conversation. What's new? Good. Well, so let's speak again soon. It's good to hear from you. It's good to hear from you too. We'll write and make a time for the next call. We'll talk. Yes. Definitely. Soon. See you soon. Look after yourselves. All the best. You too.

But it was no joke: our lives hung by a thread. I realize now that they were not at all sure they would really talk again, this might be the last time, who knew what would happen, there could be riots, a pogrom, a bloodbath, the Arabs might rise up and slaughter the lot of us, there might be a war, a terrible disaster, after all Hitler's tanks had almost reached our doorstep from two directions, North Africa and the Caucasus, who knew what else awaited us? This empty conversation was not really empty, it was just awkward.

4. School - Zelda

Teacher Zelda talked so softly that if we wanted to hear what she was saying we not only had to stop talking, we had to lean forward on our desks. Consequently we spent the whole morning



leaning forward, because we did not want to miss a word. Everything that Teacher Zelda said was enchanting and rather unexpected. It was as if we learnt another language from her, not very different from Hebrew and yet

distinctive and touching. She would call stars the 'stars of heaven', the abyss was 'the mighty abyss, and she spoke of 'turbid rivers' and 'nocturnal deserts'. If you said something in class that she liked, Teacher Zelda would point towards you and say softly: 'Look, all of you, there's a child who's flooded with light.' If one of the girls was daydreaming, Teacher Zelda explained to us that just

as nobody can be blamed for being unable to sleep, so you couldn't hold Noa responsible for being unable to stay awake at times.

She was my first love. An unmarried woman in her thirties, Teacher Zelda, Miss Schneersohn. I was not quite eight and she swept me away, she set some kind of inner metronome in motion that had not stirred before and has not stopped since. When I woke up in the morning I conjured up her image even before my eyes were open. I dressed and ate my breakfast in a flash, eager to finish, zip up, close, pick up, run straight to her. My head melted with the effort to prepare something new and interesting for her every day so that I would get the light of her look and so that she would point to me and say, 'Look, there's a boy among us this morning who's flooded with light.'

EACH OF US HAS A NAME - ZELDA

Each of us has a name,
given to us by God,
and given to us by our father
and mother.
Each of us has a name,
given to us by our stature
and our way of smiling,
and given to us by our clothes.
Each of us has a name,
given to us by the mountains,
and given to us by our walls.
Each of us has a name,
given to us by the planets,
and given to us by our neighbors. -

Each of us has a name,
given to us by our sins,
and given to us by our longing.
Each of us has a name,
given to us by our enemies,
and given to us by our love.
Each of us has a name,
given to us by our fast days,
and given to us by our craft.
Each of us has a name,
given to us by the seasons of the
year,
and given to us by our blindness.
Each of us has a name,
given to us by the sea,
and given to us by our death.

Homelands - Vilna



Their elder son, David, that committed and conscientious Europhile, stayed in Vilna. There, at a very early age, and despite being Jewish, he was appointed to a teaching position in literature at the University. He had no doubt set his heart on the glorious career of Uncle Joseph, just as my father did all his life. There in Vilna he would marry a young

woman called Malka, and there, in 1938, his son Daniel would be born. I never saw this son, born a year and a half before me, nor have I ever managed to find a photograph of him. There are only some postcards and a few letters left, written in Polish by Aunt Malka (Macia).....

Little Daniel Klaussner would live for less than three years. Soon they would come and kill him to protect 'Europe' from him, to prevent in advance Hitler's 'nightmare vision of the seduction of hundreds and thousands of girls by repulsive, bandy-legged Jew bastards . . . But Uncle David thought otherwise: he despised and dismissed such hateful views as these, refused to consider solemn Catholic anti-Semitism echoing among the stone vaults of high cathedrals, or coldly lethal Protestant anti-Semitism, German racialism, Austrian murderousness, Polish Jew-hatred, Lithuanian, Hungarian or French cruelty, Ukrainian, Romanian, Russian and Croatian love of pogroms, Belgian, Dutch, British, Irish and Scandinavian mistrust of Jews. All these seemed to him an obscure relic of savage, ignorant aeons, remains of yesteryear, whose time was up. A specialist in comparative literature, for him the literatures of Europe were a spiritual homeland. He did not see why he should leave where he was and immigrate to Western Asia, a place that was strange and alien, just to please ignorant anti-Semites and narrow-minded nationalist thugs. So he stayed at his post, flying the flag of progress, culture, art, and spirit without frontiers, until the Nazis came to Vilna: culture-loving Jews, intellectuals and cosmopolitans were not to their taste, and so they murdered David, Malka and my little cousin Daniel, who was nicknamed

Danush or Danushek; in a penultimate letter, dated 15.12.40, his parents wrote that 'he has recently started walking . . . and he has an excellent memory'. Uncle David saw himself as a child of his time: a distinguished, multicultural, multi-lingual, fluent, enlightened European and a decidedly modern man. He despised prejudices and ethnic hatreds, and he was resolved never to give in to low-brow racialists, chauvinists, demagogues and benighted, prejudice-ridden anti-Semites, whose raucous voices promised 'death to the Jews' and barked at him from the walls: 'Yids, go to Palestine!' To Palestine? Definitely not: a man of his stamp would not take his young bride and infant son, defect from the front line and run away to hide from the violence of a noisy rabble in some drought-stricken Levantine province, where a few desperate Jews tried their hand at establishing a segregationist armed nationhood that, ironically, they had apparently learned from the worst of their foes. No, he would definitely stay here in Vilna, at his post, in one of the most vital forward trenches of that rational, broad-minded, tolerant and liberal European enlightenment that was now fighting for its existence against the waves of barbarism that were threatening to engulf it. Here he would stand, for he could do no other. To the end.

In 1947 the Tel Aviv publisher Joshua Chachik brought out my father's first book, The Novella in Hebrew Literature, from its origins to the end of the Haskalah.... on a separate page, after the title page, my father dedicated his book to the memory of his brother David:

To my first teacher of literary history -

My only brother

David

Whom I lost in the darkness of exile.

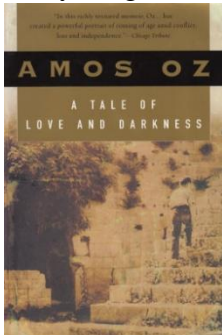
Where art thou?

A Tale of Love and Darkness

Remaking the Home

MY MOTHER WAS thirty-eight when she died. At the age I am today, I could be her father. After her funeral, my father and I stayed at home for several days. He did not go to work and I did not go to school. The door of the flat was open all day long. We received a constant flow of neighbors, acquaintances and relations. Kind neighbors volunteered to make sure there were soft drinks for all the visitors, and coffee, cakes and tea.

Even after the mourning period was over, when the flat was finally empty and my father and I locked the door and were alone together, we hardly talked to one another. Except about the most essential things. The kitchen door is jammed. There was no post today. The bathroom's free but there's no toilet paper. We also avoided meeting each other's eyes, as though we were ashamed of something we had both done that it would have been better if we hadn't, and at the very least it would have been better if we could have been ashamed quietly without a partner who knew everything about you that you knew about him. We never talked about my mother. Not a single



word. Or about ourselves. Or about anything that had the least thing to do with emotions. We talked about the Cold War. We talked about the assassination of King Abdullah and the threat of a second round of fighting. My father explained to me the difference between a symbol, a parable and an allegory, and the difference between a saga and a legend. He also gave me a clear and accurate account of the difference between Liberalism and Social Democracy.....

Despite the silence and the shame, Dad and I were close at that time, as we had been the previous winter, a year and a month before, when Mother's condition took a turn for the worse and he and I were like a pair of stretcher-bearers carrying an injured person up a steep slope. This time we were carrying each other.

The Same Sea

A Cat

A CAT Not far from the sea, Mr Albert Danon lives in Amirim Street, alone. He is fond of olives and feta; a mild accountant, he lost his wife not long ago. Nadia Danon died one morning of ovarian cancer, leaving some clothes, a dressing table, some finely embroidered tablemats. Their only son, Enrico David, has gone off mountaineering in Tibet. Here in Bat Yam the summer morning is hot and clammy but on those mountains night is falling. Mist is swirling low in the ravines. A needle-sharp wind howls as though alive, and the fading light looks more and more like a nasty dream. At this point the track forks: one way is steep, the other gently sloping.

Not a trace on the map of the fork in the track. And as the evening darkens and the wind lashes him with sharp hailstones, Rico has to guess whether to take the shorter or the easier way down. Either way, Mr. Danon will get up now and switch off his computer. He will go and stand by the window. Outside in the yard on the wall is a cat. It has spotted a lizard. It will not let go.

Oz, Amos. The Same Sea (p. 1). Random House. Kindle Edition.

Back in Bat Yam his Father Upbraids him

Rebellious son. Stubborn son.

I am asleep but my heart is awake.

My heart is awake and makes lament,

The smell of my son is like the smell of a harlot.

There is no peace for my bones on account of your wanderings. How long?

But his Mother Defends Him

His mother says:

My view is different.

Wandering is fitting for those who have lost their way.

Kiss the feet my son

Of the woman Maria

Whose womb, for an instant, returned you to mine.

Oz, Amos. The Same Sea (p. 31). Random House. Kindle Edition.

No Butterflies and No Tortoise

The forecast, that had promised a chance of snow on high ground,

Had not kept its promise.

But Nadia, who had promised nothing, appeared at his door one Saturday morning,

In a light-colored frock with a red scarf round her neck,

Somewhere between a girl and a woman.

Did I surprise you? Are you free?

(Am I free? Oh, painfully free.

His heart dissolved in bashful glee.

Nadia. Has come. To visit. Me.)

Albert was renting a room from a childless couple in old Bat Yam.

They were away for the weekend.

The flat was all his.
He sat Nadia down on his bed and went to the kitchen to slice some black bread,
And came back bearing a tray with a choice of feta or honey.
He paced round the room,
Then returned to the kitchen,
And chopped some tomatoes to make a salad so fine and well-seasoned as though this would
convince her that he was right.
He would not let her lift a finger to help him.
He made an omelet.
Put the kettle on. Like a man in his element.
This surprised her, because previously whenever they went out together to a café or the cinema
Albert had seemed so hesitant and unassertive.
And now it emerged that at home he did precisely what he wanted,
And what he wanted was to do everything himself.
She touched his hand with her fingertip: thank you.
It's nice here. Coffee. Biscuits.
But how do you start on love on a rainy Saturday morning like this,
In a shabby room in old Bat Yam in the mid-Sixties?
(In the headlines in the paper on the kitchen table Nasser threatened and Eshkol warned of the
risk of escalation.)
The light flickered.
The room was small.
Nadia sat.
Albert faced her.
Neither of them knew how to begin.
The would-be lover was a shy young man,
Who had only ever dreamed of sleeping with a woman.
He dreaded yet wanted it;
He wanted it but was deterred by a faint fear of bodily embarrassments.
His would-be partner,
a reserved divorcee,
Lived in a room on a roof,
Sewed for a living,
Her past was somewhat conventional.
She was no hind and he was no young hart.
How and with what do you begin to love?
Nadia sat. Albert stood.
Outside it was raining again, the rain getting heavier,
Of dull grey shutters along the empty wet street;
Hammering on overturned dustbins, polishing the panes in the tight-shut windows,
Pouring down on rooftops,
On forests of aerials trembling in the freezing wind
That beat on zinc tubs hanging on grilles of kitchen balconies.
And the gutters grunted and choked like an old man sleeping fitfully.
How do you start love now?
Nadia stood. Albert sat.

Through the wall from the next-door flat came the Saturday morning program on the radio.
A musical quiz. Nadia is here but where am I?
He tried to tell her some news from the office,
Not to break the thread of the conversation.
But the thread was no thread.
She was waiting and he was waiting
For whatever would come at the end of the thread.
What would come? And who would make it come?
She was embarrassed. So was he.
He kept on and on trying to explain something in economics.
Instead of words like credit side, debit side,
Nadia heard, my sister, my bride.
And when he spoke of bulls and bears
She translated, you have doves' eyes.
While he was talking she reached for a cushion,
And Albert trembled because on the way the warmth of her breast touched his back.
It's up to me to overcome his fear.
What would a really experienced woman do now in my place?
She cut in: apparently, all of a sudden, she had a speck of dust in her eye.
Or a fly. He bent over to get a good look.
Now his face was close to her brow,
She could clasp his temples with her hands,
And at last lower his lips for a pleasing, teasing first kiss.
Two weeks later, in her room on the roof,
Between two rain showers, he asked for her hand.
He did not say, be my wife, but instead:
If you'll marry me then I'll marry you.
Because it was Nadia's second marriage they had a small, intimate party,
At her brother and sister-in-law's home,
With a handful of relations and a few friends,
And the elderly couple in whose flat Albert lodged.
After the ceremony and the party they took a taxi to the Sharon Hotel.
Albert undid the straining hooks one by one down the back of her wedding dress.
Then the bride turned out the light and they both undressed modestly,
in total darkness, on opposite sides of the bed.
They groped their way towards each other.
She sensed she would have to teach him:
After all I presumably know better than he does.
It turned out however that shy Albert could teach her something she neither knew nor imagined:
the broad, flowing surge of joy of one who was shy as long as the light was on but in the pitch
dark was insatiable.
In the dark he entered into his own element.
No butterflies now and no tortoise at all,
But like a hart panting for water or a swallow for its nest.
His chest to her back, and belly to belly, horse and his rider
And into every breach.

Ditta Offers

Give me five minutes to try to sort out this screwed-up business. People are constantly being ditched. Here in Greater Tel Aviv for example I bet the daily total of ditchings is not far short of the figure for burglaries. In New York the statistics must be even higher. Your mother killed herself and left you quite shattered. And haven't you yourself ditched any number of women? Who in turn had ditched whoever they ditched in favor of you, and those ditched guys had certainly left some wounded Ditchinka lying on the battlefield. It's all a chain reaction. OK, I'm not saying, I admit being ditched by your own parents is different, it bleeds for longer. Specially a mother. And you an only son. But how long for? Your whole life? The way I see it being in mourning for your mother for forty-five years is pretty ridiculous. It's more than ridiculous: it's insulting to other women. Your wife, for instance. Or your daughters. I find it a turn-off myself. Why don't you try and see it my way for a moment: I'm twenty-six and you'll soon be sixty, a middle-aged orphan who goes knocking on women's doors and guess what he's come to beg for. The fact that before my parents were even born your mother called you Amek isn't a life sentence. It's high time you gave her the push. Just the way she chucked you. Let her wander round her forests at night without you. Let her find herself some other sucker. It's true it's not easy to ditch your own mother, so why don't you stick her in some other scene, not in a forest, let's say in a lake: cast her as the Loch Ness monster, which as everyone knows may be down there or may not exist, but one thing is certain, whatever you see or think you see on the surface isn't the monster, it's just a hoax or an illusion.

Oz, Amos. *The Same Sea* (p. 134). Random House. Kindle Edition.

Jews and Words

At this early stage we need to say loud and clear what kind of Jews we are. Both of us are secular Jewish Israelis. This self-definition carries several significances. First, we do not believe in God. Second, Hebrew is our mother tongue. Third, our Jewish identity is not faith-powered. We have been reading Hebrew and non-Hebrew Jewish texts all our lives; they are our cultural and intellectual gateways to the world. Yet there is not a religious bone in our bodies. Fourth, we now live in a cultural climate—in the modern and secular part of Israeli society—that increasingly identifies Bible quoting, Talmudic reference, and even a mere interest in the Jewish past, as a politically colored inclination, at best atavistic, at worst nationalist and triumphalist. This current liberal withdrawal from most things Jewish has many reasons, some of them understandable; but it is misguided. What does secularism mean to Israeli Jews? Evidently more than it means to other modern nonbelievers. From nineteenth-century Haskalah thinkers to latter-day Hebrew authors, Jewish secularity has furnished an ever-growing bookshelf and an ever-expanding space for creative thought. Here is just one nutshell, from an essay titled “The Courage to Be Secular” by Yizhar Smilansky, the great Israeli writer who signed his books with the pseudonym Samech Yizhar: Secularism is not permissiveness, nor is it lawless chaos. It does not reject tradition, and it does not turn its back on culture, its impact and its successes. Such accusations are little more than cheap demagoguery. Secularism is a different understanding of man and the world, a non-religious understanding. Man may very well feel the need, from time to time, to search for God. The nature of that search is unimportant. There are no ready-made answers, or ready-made indulgences, pre-packaged and ready to use. And the answers themselves are traps: give up your freedom in order to gain tranquility. God’s name is tranquility. But the tranquility will dissipate and freedom will be wasted. What then? Self-conscious seculars seek not tranquility but intellectual restlessness, and love questions better than answers. To secular Jews like ourselves, the Hebrew Bible is a magnificent human creation. Solely human. We love it and we question it. Some modern archeologists tell us that the scriptural Israelite kingdom was an insignificant dwarf in terms of material culture. For example, the biblical portrayal of Solomon’s great edifices is a later political fabrication. Other scholars cast doubt on all manner of continuity between ancient Hebrews and present-day Jews. Perhaps this is what Amichai meant when he said we are “not even an archaeological people.” But each of these scholarly approaches, whether factually right or wrong, is simply irrelevant for readers like us. Our kind of Bible requires neither divine origin nor material proof, and our claim to it has nothing to do with our chromosomes.

The Tanach, the Bible in its original Hebrew, is breathtaking. Do we “understand” it to the last syllable? Obviously not. Even proficient speakers of Modern Hebrew probably misconstrue the original meanings of many biblical words, because their role in our vocabulary differs significantly from what they stood for in Ancient Hebrew. Take this exquisite image from Psalms 104:17, “Wherein the birds make their nests, hassida broshim beiyta.” חֲסִידָה בְרוֹשִׁים בְּיַתְתָּהּ To a present-day Israeli ear, these three words mean “the stork makes its home in the cypress trees.” Makes you reflect, by the way, on the winsome frugality of Ancient Hebrew, which can often pull off a three-word phrase that requires three times that number in English translation. And how colorful and flavorful is each of the three words, all nouns, brimming with meaning! Anyway, back to our main point. You see, in Israel today storks don’t make their homes on cypresses. Storks very rarely nest here anyhow, and when they settle down in their thousands for a night’s rest en route to Europe or to Africa, those needle-shaped cypresses are not their obvious choice. So we must be getting it wrong; either the hassida is not a stork, or the brash is not a cypress. Never mind. The phrase is lovely, and we know it is about a tree and a bird, part of a great praise for God’s creation, or—if you prefer—for the beauty of nature. Psalm 104 gives its Hebrew reader the broad imagery, the dense and fine-tuned delight that might be compared to the magic of a Walt Whitman poem. We don’t know whether it does the same in translation. The Bible is thus outliving its status as a holy writ. Its splendor as literature transcends both scientific dissection and devotional reading. It moves and excites in ways comparable to the great literary oeuvres, sometimes Homer, sometimes Shakespeare, sometimes Dostoevsky. But its historical leverage is different from that of these opuses. Granted that other great poems may have inaugurated religions, no other work of literature so effectively carved a legal codex, so convincingly laid out a social ethic. It is also, of course, a book that gave birth to innumerable other books. As though the Bible itself harked and heeded the command it attributes to God, “go forth and multiply.” So even if the scientists and critics are right, and ancient Israel erected no palaces and witnessed

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