

In The Land of Oz

In The Land of Israel

Thank God for His Daily Blessings

The Insult and the Fury

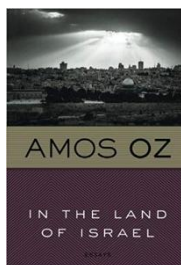
A Tale of Love and Darkness

Home - Jerusalem

Remaking the Home after the Mother's Death

The Same Sea

Jews and Words



In The Land of Israel

Thank God for His Daily Blessings

IN THE GEULAH QUARTER of Jerusalem, on Rabbi Meir Street, imprinted on one of the metal sewer covers is the English inscription “City of Westminster”—a reminder of the British Mandate in Palestine. The grocery store that was here forty years ago is still here. A new man sits there and studies Scriptures. It is after the High Holy Days: in Geulah, in Achvah, in Kerem Avraham, and in Mekor Baruch, the tatters of the flimsy booths built for the Feast of Tabernacles are still visible in the yards. Their greenery has faded and turned gray. There is a chill in the air. From porch to porch, the entire width of the alleyways, stretch laundry lines with white and colored clothes: these are the eternal morning blossoms of the neighborhood in which I grew up. The Kings of Israel Street, which was once Geulah Street, throbs with pious Jews in black garb, bearded, bespectacled, chattering in Yiddish, tumultuous, in a hurry, scented with the heavy aroma of Eastern European Ashkenazi cooking.

During my childhood, Eastern European intellectuals and educated refugees from Germany and Austria used to live here side by side with the ultraorthodox. There were artisans here, and scholars, trade-union functionaries, National Religious Party hacks and dedicated Revisionists, clerks in the Mandatory government and workers in the Jewish Agency, members of the Haganah and the Irgun, youth from Betar and the United Socialist Movement and the Bnai Akiva, the religious youth movement, noted scholars, village fools, madmen burning with prophetic light, world reformers who would compose and dedicate to one another fiery brochures about the brutal realities of Zionism, or about how the Palestinian Arabs originated from the ancient Hebrews, or about the blessings of organic vegetarianism. Almost every man was a kind of messiah, eager to crucify his opponents and willing to be crucified for his own faith in turn. All of them have gone. Or changed their minds. Or pulled up their roots from here and gone to more moderate places. But they left behind them a vibrant Jewish shtetl. The potted plants so carefully nurtured by enthusiastic would-be farmers have long since died. The gardens and pigeon coops have gone to rubble. In the courtyards stand sheds of tin and plywood and piles of junk.

Yeshiva students, Hasidim, petty merchants have overflowed into this place from the Meah Shearim and the Sanhedria quarters, or bunched up here from Toronto, from New York, and from Belgium. They have many children. Most of the children, even the littlest ones, wear glasses. Yiddish is the language of the street. Zionism was here once and was repelled. Were it not for the stone, and the olive trees and the pines, were it not for that particular quality of light in Jerusalem, you might think you are standing in some Eastern European Jewish shtetl before Hitler. Eastern European with perhaps a tinge of America, and a slight, remote echo from neighboring Israel. Next to “Photo Geulah, Especially for the Ultra-orthodox,” there is a notice board: “Performance tonight in the Convention Center by Mordecai Ben David Werdiger and the Diaspora Yeshiva Band. Tickets at the Bookshop, Beer Books. Special discounts for groups.

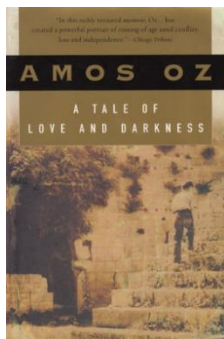
Proceeds to be donated for Torah education in Jerusalem.” Someone has defaced the notice with tar and scrawled the words “Criminals of Israel,” painting, for added emphasis, a fat swastika. The explanation apparently lies in another notice, on a stone wall nearby: Rabbi Yisrael Yaakov Kravsky proclaims, “A clarion call to shun ugliness and anything resembling it, with regard to community singing, men and women together, in the guise of holiness and piety, which leads to the pitfalls of levity and immodesty, heaven forbid. Even if it were guaranteed to be arranged in a kosher way, they still err, for now that the Temple is destroyed, because of our many transgressions, it is forbidden to sing, especially in gatherings with musical instruments.

The Insult and the Fury

I sit down at a café that has four or five tables outside, by the square. Young men drinking beer. Someone reading an afternoon newspaper. Several people discussing sports events. One turns to me and asks if I have come to look into “Project Build-Your-Own-Home.” Without waiting for my answer, he says, “What do you want to live in Bet Shemesh for? Forget it. This place is a dump and will always be a dump.” Why a dump? “There’s nothing here: people work, eat, watch TV, go to sleep; that’s it. And on the Sabbath they chew sunflower seeds.” Another man, a local patriot perhaps, differs: “And what do you think Tel Aviv is today? America? In Tel Aviv, everybody watches TV and goes to sleep, too. And, actually, what do they do in America today? TV and bed. The whole world’s like that these days. You from Nature Preservation?” Why? “I just thought. . . you sort of look like that. I once worked for Nature Preservation.” Someone else comments acidly, “One thing’s for sure: this here is an Alignment type.” I ask if there aren’t any Alignment supporters in Bet Shemesh. “There are a few left—living on handouts from the Labor Party. And there are a lot in Givat Sharett. [Givat Sharett evokes an expression of disgust.] But most of us know exactly what Shimon Peres is, and we can tell those kibbutzniks by their faces.” I try cautiously, “Is there such a thing as a Likud face, too?” Now the table erupts, as five or six men talk at once, their faces distorted by hatred. One voice, of scathing ridicule, is heard over the rest. “A Likud face? Sure—black, a delinquent, Khomeini. A punk. Violent. That’s what Shimon Peres [he pronounces it” Peretz"] called us at his rally, before the elections. You must have heard. Saw they were heckling him a little and went crazy. He began to flip out deliberately, so they would heckle him some more and it would appear on TV, to scare the Ashkenazim so they’d run and vote for him and hooligans like us wouldn’t be on top.” At this point, a young man with delicate features intervenes. Using logic, restraint, and moderation, he presents me with a question of principle. “Tell me, what’s your honest opinion of a guy who flips out because of a couple of pranksters shouting ‘Begin, Begin,’ and right then and there starts cursing out the audience? Can a guy like that be prime minister? That’s a leader? Can’t take the pressure. Breaks down right away. Almost began to cry. Believe me, the guy had tears in his eyes. And he started to call the audience names—Khomeinis, hooligans. How’s this guy going to stand up to the Arabs? How’s he going to stand up to the world? How?” Another man, his head covered with a skullcap, adds emphasis to the question with a contrasting example: “Look at Begin in the Knesset. As soon as he starts to speak, they start shouting at him from the floor, worse than Bet Shemesh. Rakach and the Arabs and Yossi Sarid and all those. And Begin stands there quietly, looking at them like a father, letting them spill it all out, then destroys them with one joke and continues talking. That’s the way a leader acts. This Peretz is uptight. He’s got no guts. And he’s

changed his mind maybe twenty times. They say, maybe you heard, that when Golda was alive Peretz wanted to join the Likud but Begin wouldn't have him. Maybe that's where his hatred comes from." A man of about forty-five, fat and balding, approaches the table and bursts out angrily: "What are you talking to him for, anyway? Don't you know who this is? Didn't you see him on television?" There is a small embarrassed silence. Then, loudly, they begin to try to identify me: From the newspaper? From the Knesset? From the Communists? This isn't Peace Now, is it? Are you a writer? Aren't you from Kibbutz Hulda? Amos Kenan? Dan Ben-Amos? Oz? Sure, we recognize you. What did you come for? To write an article on Bet Shemesh? To make propaganda for the Alignment? And then to smear us? Within a few minutes, about twenty young men have gathered around the table. They order a cold drink for me. They order coffee. They ask my word of honor that I will write the "truth." That I won't write at all. That I will sit in silence and listen to what troubles them. That I will tell my "friends among the writers and from television" what people in Bet Shemesh think? That I mustn't think I have any idea what Bet Shemesh is really about. Not one of them asks me to leave. On the contrary: "You should know that we don't hold grudges. We won't get even with you for what you said on TV against Begin and against the country."

Oz, Amos. In the Land of Israel (pp. 29-30). Mariner Books. Kindle Edition.



A Tale of Love and Darkness

Home - Jerusalem

I WAS BORN and bred in a tiny, low-ceilinged ground-floor flat. My parents slept on a sofa bed that filled their room almost from wall to wall when it was opened up each evening. Early every morning they used to shut away this bed deep into itself, hide the bedclothes in the chest underneath, turn the mattress over, press it all tight shut, and conceal the whole under a light grey cover, then scatter a few embroidered oriental cushions on top, so that all evidence of their night's sleep disappeared. In this way their bedroom also served as study, library, dining room and living room. Opposite this room was my little green room, half taken up with a big-bellied wardrobe. A narrow, low passage, dark and slightly curved, like an escape tunnel from a prison, linked the little kitchenette and toilet to these two small rooms. A faint light-bulb imprisoned in an iron cage cast a gloomy half-light on this passage even during the daytime. At the front both rooms had just a single window, guarded by metal blinds, squinting to catch a glimpse of the view to the east but seeing only a dusty cypress tree and a low wall of roughly dressed stones. Through a tiny opening high up in their back walls the kitchenette and toilet peered out into a little prison yard, surrounded by high walls and paved in concrete, where a pale geranium planted in a rusty olive can was gradually dying for want of a single ray of sunlight. On the sills of these tiny openings we always kept jars of pickled gherkins and a stubborn cactus in a cracked vase that served as a flower pot. It was actually a basement flat, as the ground floor of the building had been hollowed out of the rocky hillside. This hill was our next-door neighbor, a heavy, introverted, silent neighbor, an old, sad hill with the regular habits of a bachelor, a drowsy, wintry hill, that never scraped the furniture or entertained guests,

never made a noise or disturbed us, but through the party walls there seeped constantly towards us, like a faint yet persistent musty smell, the cold, dark silence and dampness of this melancholy neighbor of ours. Consequently right through the summer there was always a hint of winter in our home.

Visitors would say: it's always so pleasant here in a heatwave, so cool and fresh, really chilly, but how do you manage in the winter? Don't the walls let in the damp? Don't you find it depressing? * Books filled our home. My father could read in sixteen or seventeen languages, and could speak eleven (all with a Russian accent). My mother spoke four or five languages and read seven or eight. They conversed in Russian or Polish when they did not want me to understand. (Which was most of the time. When my mother referred to a stallion in Hebrew in my hearing my father rebuked her furiously in Russian: Shto s toboy?! Vidish malchik ryadom s nami! – What's the matter with you? You can see the boy's just there!) Out of cultural considerations they mostly read books in German or English, and they presumably dreamed in Yiddish. But the only language they taught me was Hebrew. Maybe they feared that a knowledge of languages would expose me too to the blandishments of Europe, that wonderful, murderous continent. On my parents' scale of values, the more western something was the more cultured it was considered. For all that Tolstoy and Dostoevski were dear to their Russian souls, I suspect that Germany – despite Hitler – seemed to them more cultured than Russia or Poland, and France more so than Germany. England stood even higher on their scale than France. As for America, there they were not so sure: after all, it was a country where people shot at Indians, held up mail trains, chased gold and hunted girls. Europe for them was a forbidden promised land, a yearned-for landscape of belfries and squares paved with ancient flagstones, of trams and bridges and church spires, remote villages, spa towns, forests and snow-covered meadows. Words like 'cottage', 'meadow' or 'goose-girl' excited and seduced me all through my childhood. They had a sensual aroma of a genuine, cosy world, far from the dusty tin roofs, the urban wasteland of scrap iron and thistles, the parched hillsides of our Jerusalem, suffocating under the weight of white-hot summer. It was enough for me to whisper to myself 'meadow', and at once I could hear the lowing of cows with little bells tied round their necks, and the burbling of brooks. Closing my eyes I could see the barefoot goose-girl, whose sexiness brought me to tears before I knew about anything.

Oz, Amos. *A Tale Of Love And Darkness* (p. 2). Random House. Kindle Edition.

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 בְּיַתֵּהּ 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 brosh 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

Oz, Amos. *Jews and Words* (Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization) (pp. 4-6). Yale University Press. Kindle Edition.