

Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger's book, "jews and words," weighs in at a slim 200 pages. It is a conversation between a father, a renowned Israel novelist now in his late 70's, and his daughter, a historian, my age. Reading the book, you feel as if you are sitting in the Oz living room eavesdropping — the conversation is fun, irreverent, and personal. One imagines that it would be both enjoyable and intellectually challenging to have grown up in the Oz home.

The structure of the book — loose, associational, conversational — advances the book's central argument which is that Jewish history is neither primarily ethnic nor political but rather an "intergenerational transmittal of verbal content." "Ours," they write, "is not a bloodline but a textline...We are not about stones, clans, or chromosomes." Rather, intergenerational quizzing of the seder variety—"If your son asks you tomorrow, What are the testimonies, and statutes, and the ordinances, which the Lord our God has commanded you?" — is, according to the Ozes the Jewish Philosopher's Stone, "a pedagogical module of memory, harking back to the national cradle, the Book of Exodus. Please, Son, ask me."

For our authors, to be Jewish, is to be part of this millennial conversation. That conversation, in important ways, begins with God's question to Adam – ayeka – where are you? Where do you stand viz a viz me? It echoes across Abraham's question to God – will you destroy the righteous with the wicked and Jacob's wrestling with the angel and Moses' election at the bush. It is a conversation between Maccabees and Hellenists about what it means to be a Jew. It is a conversation between Hillel and Shammai, between Rav and Abaye, between Saadia Gaon and Hai Gaon, between the Rambam and the Ramban. It is a conversation between hasids and mitnageds, between Zionists and Bundists, between Americans and Israelis.

This conversation is not abstract. It has a texture and a flavor all its own. It is a conversation that makes us kiss the ground at Ben Gurion even when we don't agree with such flourishes or the ideology that accompanies them. It is a conversation that makes us laugh at the joke about the Jewish grandmother who, when her grandson is miraculously delivered from the ocean, reminds God that the baby also had a hat. It is a conversation that allows us, yay, encourages us to argue with God and holds that God enjoys the argument. It is served with chicken soup or mujadahra, in Yiddish or Ladino or Hebrew or English, by grandmas and savtas, and bubbes with two heapings of love and a gentle chiding just so your head shouldn't swell and the evil eye should not be tempted.

It is also a conversation that happens when we take seriously our teenagers' question: If you are not prejudiced, why do you care if I date a non-Jew? It is a conversation that happens when we explore what Jewish values we bring to bear as we choose whom to vote for. It is a conversation that happens when we tell our bosses that we need two days off for Rosh Hashanah, and yes, Shavuot is a thing, even though they've never heard of it.

To join the conversation, you need to know what mah nishtanah is. You need to know what it means to be a God-wrestler and why your name is Yisrael. You need to know what kol nidre sounds like deep in your bones. Hatikvah has to hit you in the kishkes, and you better know what those are too. You need to know what it means to stand on one foot, what it means to be redeemed, what it means to live a life that is precarious and deep and funny and argumentative and rich all wrapped in one.

This is the conversation of the ages happening all the time across generations, languages and countries. It is the richest conversation ever and it has smells, and clothes, and languages and characters who always pop up in it. It is about the meaning of life on the deepest level and it is about your life at the most personal level. Every time we light candles, every time we read Torah, every time we bless our children, every time we break a glass, we dip into this conversation. We swim in its vast sea. We expand ourselves beyond our own bodies and the room we sit in becomes a palace of the ages. But, we are only part of this conversation if we sit at the table and if we know how to speak the language.

My question this morning is: Are you in the conversation? On the one hand, most of us, I think, would say, yes. I'm here, right. I am a member of a synagogue, I care deeply about being Jewish, I sent my kids to religious school, I give philanthropic dollars to many Jewish causes. Of course I am in the conversation.

On the other hand, the Ozes are talking about a somewhat different conversation, and I think it is worth taking their point seriously as a challenge. Because, at the end of the day, they are saying that ethnic Judaism is not enough. And they are saying that Jewish survival — whether that means the religious school education of our kids or supporting ADL or Federation — is not enough.

They are saying that you have to be part of this conversation. And I think that for too long, too many Jews have not learned what the conversation is and they are not part of it. We, the Jewish establishment, have failed. We have told people that it is enough to send your kids to religious school until they are 13 years old, ignoring the fact that the parents themselves are not able to transmit Jewish knowledge, and that education too often ends at 13. We have preached politics from the bimah and ignored our sacred texts. We have left people with 3rd grade notions of God and silly Bible stories and not taught mature theological grappling or how to understand Jewish texts as an adult, how one might use these texts to make sense of one's own complicated life. Too often I have seen people in crisis with no sense of a God to turn to because they never learned anything beyond a 3rd grade idea of God. We have been content when people give money to the synagogue or Federation or Jewish Family Service or Israel Bonds, as if charitable contributions, saving Jewish lives, can save Jewish souls. We have built cathedrals to our faith but we are unsure what to put inside them. A steady diet of the Holocaust and Israel wears thin.

I hear you protest: I am deeply invested in this project. And I know you are. Even the infamous Pew study reports that 94% of American Jews are proud to be Jewish. We're

doing OK, right? And I am proud — very proud — when I see your names at the head of the masthead, leading Federation, leading the Jewish Endowment Fund, leading Jewish Family and Children's Services, heading up Ezra Academy, being honored at ADL. I am willing to bet that B'nai Jacob members, more than any other congregation in our area, lead Jewish agencies and communal organizations. I think, by the way, that it is probably true for Conservative congregations generally — we get what it means to be invested in our community, to be communal Jews.

But here's my worry — that the cobbler's children have no shoes. That with all our communal leadership, we ignore this place, this synagogue, which I think needs to be primary.

I want to be clear about what I am saying: I am not asking you at this moment to give more money to the synagogue or to serve on a committee, although those things are undoubtedly important and Adam urged you in that direction yesterday and I will again on Yom Kippur. Those things matter but that is not what I am asking for today. What I am asking is that you find a way to be more deeply part of the Jewish conversation — that you find a way to grow in knowledge — that you take your seat at the table. It doesn't have to be here at the synagogue. There are other ways to do it. But for most of us the synagogue is our first Jewish institution and, I think, should be our home base institution — the place where we learn Torah, the place where we learn and practice Jewish ritual, the place, outside the family, where Jewish conversation begins. Maybe ideally that place would be the dinner table — but too many of us no longer have the skills or the knowledge to make the dinner table that place — we need the synagogue's help to make our families Jewish families and to learn how to engage this conversation. I often tell parents to be jazz musicians at their seder, to take the haggadah and riff — but if you don't know the notes, it's hard to play. The myriad of Jewish institutions you support matter, and I want you to keep supporting them, but they are not the place where you learn to be Jewish, to be part of the conversation. This is.

When I was in Israel last summer, an Israeli rabbi told the story of his grandparents who founded the kibbutz on which he grew up; they were part of the founding generation of the state of Israel — building kibbutzim, draining the swamps, establishing a state. The analogy he used was that of a mountain — they had spent their lives climbing a big mountain and had expended considerable effort to do so. But, as a young man, when he began to explore his Jewishness more consciously, he discovered "suitcases" at the bottom of the mountain, unopened suitcases, suitcases that were too heavy for them to schlep up top — after all, they had a state to build. But those suitcases were full of Jewish content — Jewish ritual, Jewish texts, Jewish living — Jewish stuff that was missing in his life that he needed in order to build his own Jewish identity.

The American story is not identical to the Israeli story, but I would posit that we too have left many heavy suitcases at the base of the mountain. Maybe we knew what was inside some of them and chose to discard them anyway; lots, we never opened. We had no idea what we were missing. For the last century, Jews, for good reason, have put Jewish survival at the center of the Jewish project. We had no choice. We needed

to save Jewish lives in Europe and in Israel. We needed to secure a Jewish future in America. But at the same time, we paid a price. We have given short shrift to the our rich cultural and intellectual legacy— we have neglected Jewish life for the sake of Jewish lives. Ahad Ha'am, the great Zionist thinker, and Franz Rosenzweig, a great Jewish philosopher of the 20th c, argue that if you put physical survival at the center, you will end up ignoring meaning. Ahad Ha'am, 120 years ago, wrote: “a political ideal which does not rest on the national (in other words Jewish) culture is apt to seduce us from our loyalty to spiritual greatness, and to beget in us a tendency to find the path of glory in the attainment of material power and political dominion; thus breaking the thread that unites us with the past...” Prophetic. Rosenzweig, 50 years later, feared that the only thing uniting Jews was the struggle against antisemitism. He argued that neither Zionism nor the academic Jewish scholarship of his day, which he pronounced dead, nor fighting anti-Semitism can save the Jewish people. The only thing that can, he says, is a renaissance of Jewish learning, a return to Jewish conversations.

So, this year, on Rosh Hashana, I want to invite each of you to engage in Jewish conversation more deeply. I’m going to list five ways that I think are in reach for me and probably for you. I invite you to take a moment, as I list some of these possibilities, to let the ideas land and see which ones resonate with you.

Jewish study: You could study Jewishly this year, either here at the synagogue or elsewhere. A conversation with Jewish texts can help us think about the big questions in our lives and realize that we are not alone, that others have asked these questions before us. Here at B’nai Jacob our adult ed offerings this fall are spectacular and the beautiful brochure is in your mahzor — everything from Talmud class with me to Genealogy with Dan Oren to Challah baking with Dana Schwartz and Leslie Zackin. Or what if we started a book club, not just an annual Big Read, that read a book a month of contemporary Jewish writers, fiction and non-fiction? (pause)

Living more deeply into the Jewish calendar: Could you deepen your shabbat observance? Perhaps lighting Shabbat candles, inviting guests to your Shabbos table, or unplugging for an evening or a whole day? You might build a sukkah, if it’s not your regular practice, or spend a good chunk of time planning your seder ritual, and make it something more innovative this year.

Prayer: Do you want to come to services on Shabbat, or, if you already do, do you want to explore giving yourself over to prayer more deeply? Our monthly Shir Hadash service is a special opportunity to do just that.

Sitting shiva and visiting at a shiva: Most of us sit shiva and visit people who are sitting shiva; but I think we can deepen our practice by really creating the space for mourners to grieve. As it is, I’ve seen so many mourners feel like they need to play host. What if we turned that practice around in our community, and really invited the grieving to sit, while we handled everything?

Social Action: What if we understood the social action we do as emanating directly from the justice our Torah commands? On Yom Kippur, I will say more about this, but there are a myriad of things you can do from serving dinner at the Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen to growing vegetables in our mitzvah garden (we gave away 200 lbs of produce this summer!) to cooking a meal for a congregant in need.

What will you do this year?

Speaking these words makes me think about Rabbi Everett Gendler, a very influential person in my life who just celebrated, his 90th birthday, ken ayin ha'rah. I grew up in what was then, at least to my eyes, a regular Jewish home — we had a seder, we went to synagogue on High Holidays, I went to Hebrew school. My parents did what they thought was right, but Judaism was not a source of meaning in their lives. I think they did what they did so we would know they mattered.

When I met Everett, my junior year in high school, he changed my life. This is a man who shook his lulav as if the world depended on it, who grew his own vegetables and celebrated his harvest in his sukkah, who took us all in a beat up van to see the sunrise at Marblehead in the position it was on the day of Creation, a once in 28 years event. This is a man who lived the Jewish conversation, who derived his life's meaning from its richness.

If I could accomplish one thing this morning, it would be that next year when I stand here and talk to you, you would be able to say: I am more engaged. I am more of a part of the story. I am in the conversation and therefore my life has more meaning and purpose.

Why does it matter? Why do you need to do this? Why is it not enough just to be a good person or to give generously to Jewish causes or to be a member of this synagogue? Three reasons.

1. Your kids. Today there are no guarantees that your children will marry Jewish or raise Jewish children no matter what you do. We all know that. You throw the dice. But we can load the dice, and I submit that the most important facet of that dice loading is how much your kids see that Judaism matters to you — not because you give money, not because you drive them to religious school — but because they see that this is how you construct meaning in your life, because they experience this as the conversation of your life and they want to be part of it, because they see you genuinely loving to pray, to learn, to dance at Simhat Torah, not for them, but for you, because it matters to you. You can't invite your children into the conversation if you do not know how to have the conversation.
2. Why do we need religion at all? Most people know what the right thing to do is. Just do it. Just do good deeds, give to good causes, feed the hungry, like Isaiah says, clothe the naked. Who needs religion? I would submit that what humans need, maybe more than anything else, is a story. We need to be connected to a big story and feel that we are transmitters of that story. We need to hear the story told to us

by a loving parent or grandparent and we need to pass it on in turn to our descendants. Religion gives poetics to our lives — it gives us a walk for our talk. Stories connect us to meaning — not just do this because it is right or it is the law — but a multifaceted meaning that you can play around with in your head, that lingers on your tongue, that gives fragrance to the air. When doing good is tied up with our big story, it means something different, and, I think, we are more likely to do it. It is one thing to know that you should love the stranger. It is another thing to understand that this is because you were once a stranger in the land of Egypt and you know the heart of the stranger, you know what oppression and estrangement feel like. It is yet another thing to have a ritual in which you tell that story to your children and simultaneously invite the stranger to your table. It is yet another thing still if you link the seder story to your family's own immigration story, and tell your children about when your grandparents were strangers here. And It is yet another thing again that that invitation to the stranger is suffused with the smell of chicken soup, the crunchy sweet feeling of matzah in your mouth, the melody of had gadya. The story is the stuff of religion. You need to become good storytellers. That's what religion is all about.

3. Because your soul needs it. Because souls are thirsty and thirsty souls often try to quench themselves with the wrong drinks — alcohol, food, shopping, gossip. But the soul needs a story and the soul needs a conversation and the soul needs a joke and a song and the soul needs the company of one another around the table telling our story.

The Ozes write: "There is something singular in the ...creativity of those multitudes of literate Jews, their cumulative records, and their capacity to keep talking and making sense to each other across vast stretches of time, across languages, and across cultures. They are all talking to one another. Like a constant argument at a never-ending Sabbath meal, it is not likeability or like-mindedness that keeps the flame alive; it is the lexicon of great issues and deep familiarities."

It is our lexicon. It behooves us to know what's in it.

I am inviting you this year to engage more deeply in the Jewish conversation, one of the greatest conversations of all times, and it happens to be yours. I hope you will accept my invitation.