

A Tribute to Amos Oz ז"ל

Parashat Va'era

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Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

I am completely intimidated by the thought of sitting down to a cup of Turkish coffee and conversation with Amos Oz. While I have such profound respect and admiration for Israel's towering author-laureate who died just this past Friday, there is something about him that sort-of terrifies me. First of all, Amos Oz was a Hebrew language elitist...He once announced in a public discussion with British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks that "there is no difference between the castration of the Hebrew language by the Orthodox, the Reform, or the Conservative movement. They represent a unified front." Oz felt that Hebrew was the one and only common denominator among Jews from all over the world, and all different religious and cultural persuasions. And he was deeply dismayed by the relatively poor quality of the Hebrew language, even as spoken today in the modern State of Israel. I am sure that he would not approve of my conversational but less than fluent Hebrew. Oz was also an ardent secular Jew. He rejected ideas of promised land, or messianism, or destiny, or mission, or miracle. He once said about his fellow Israelis: "We are six and a half million citizens, six and a half million prime ministers, six and a half million prophets, six and a half million Messiahs, and everyone shouts at the same time and no one listens. Only I sometimes listen, [and] that is how I make a living."

So why am I mourning for a high-brow Hebraist who rejected the fundamental tenets of my faith, who once declared "I cannot use such words as 'the promised land' or the 'promised borders' because I do not believe in the one who made the promise?" Why do I feel that the State of Israel and the Jewish people have suffered a profound loss with the death of Amos Oz? Well, let me tell you...

Amos Klausner was born in Jerusalem, 9 years before David Ben Gurion declared the establishment of the State of Israel. He once remarked that Jerusalem in the 1930s was a "tiny little enclave of terrified Jewish refugees," like his parents...His father Yehudah was a frustrated academic from Odessa who worked as a librarian and was able to read 16 languages. His mother Fania, born in Ukraine, was herself a polyglot, but was wracked with debilitating depression. She died of suicide when

Oz was only 15 years old. Although Amos was raised by European born parents, they demanded that only Hebrew be spoken in their home, in part because they believed that if their son learned a European language he might want to return to that continent. After his mother's death, Amos moved away from home, joined a kibbutz, and changed his name from Klausner to Oz, meaning strength. Amos was a militant Zionist who wanted to get out of his parents stuffy, book-lined apartment and get his hands in the soil of eretz Yisrael; he wanted to be part of the building of the new Hebrew republic, not just to read about it or talk about it as an academic concept. And this is the part of Oz's character and life that truly inspires me...in fact it is connected to a phrase in parashat Va'era that I feel are so very powerful:

As God gears up for the plagues He is about to dispatch upon Pharaoh and Egypt, God says that He has heard the cries of the Jewish people, that He has not forgotten the covenant that God made with their ancestors and "*Ve'hotzeiti etchem mitachat sivlot mitzrayim,*" I am ready to take you out from beneath the burdens of Egypt. Now the plain reading of that verse seems to mean that God is going to redeem the Jewish people from slavery...that's what taking them out from under the burdens of Egypt implies. But the word choice is so interesting...what does *sivlot* mean? *Sivlot* is related to the Hebrew word *savlanut* or patience, forbearance. Another way of understanding this verse is that the Jewish people are about to be released from having to be patient with their enslavement; that they will not longer have to be resigned to being slaves, to tolerate being slaves, to maintain some kind of composure or submission to their situation. It means that they are awakening to the potential of something new, something different; a power and potential that has been dormant for too long. This is the same spirit and energy that I detect in the writing of Amos Oz.

Setting aside his personal theology, Amos Oz was unswervingly devoted to Jewish peoplehood and to the establishment of a Jewish state in the land of Israel.

"A Jew, in my vocabulary, is someone who regards himself as a Jew, and someone who is forced to be a Jew..."

To be a Jew means to relate mentally to the Jewish past, whether the relation is one of pride or of oppression or of both together, whether it consists of cultural and linguistic or of emotional participation.

To be a Jew means to relate to the Jewish present, whether by action or inaction; to take pride and participate in the achievements of Jews as Jews, and to share responsibility for injustice done by Jews as Jews.

And “Why here of all places? Because here, and only here, is where the Jews were capable of coming and establishing their independence. Because the establishment of the political independence of the Jews would not have come about in any other territory. Because here was the focus of their longings...”

Now so far you might think Amos Oz belongs in the same camp as other secular nationalists or even revisionists, like Menachem Begin, or Ze’ev Jabotinsky, or Avraham Stern...But as much as Amos Oz, who served in two of Israel’s wars, was an unflinching champion for Israel’s right to exist as the homeland of the Jewish people, he also emerged as one of Israel’s leading voices of the peace camp. To his dying day, Amos Oz advocated the two-state solution to the conflict with the Palestinians. What I respected about him so much was that he was not a Pollyanna. He did not romanticize the Palestinian cause, and he was quick to call out the failures of their leaders, and the many missed opportunities for peace. He was outspoken about the use of human shields in Gaza and supported operations to protect Israelis from terrorist attacks. But he was also not in the business of delegitimizing Palestinian claims to the land. He once said “it is the one and only homeland of the Jews, and it is the one and only homeland of the Palestinian Arabs. We cannot become one happy family, because we are not one; we are not happy, we are not family. We are two unhappy families. We have to divide the house into two smaller next-door apartments. There is no point in even fancifying that that after 100 years of bloodshed and anger and conflict that Jews and Arabs will jump into a honeymoon bed and start making love not war.” Oz was deeply opposed to Israeli occupation of Palestinians...Immediately following the Six Day War, when he was just 28 years old, he called upon Israel to begin immediate negotiations for withdrawal from the West Bank. “The shorter the occupation,” he argued, “the better for us.”

Amos Oz had no *savlanut*, no patience for mincing words or sugar coating difficult situations. He once said that the illusion of a rosy military occupation was akin to a friendly rape. There is no such thing. He worried about the effect of decade after decade of entanglement with the Palestinians in the territories on the Israeli soul

and psyche. Fifty one years ago he published a famous essay called “The Meaning of Homeland.” In it, he defined what Zionism meant to him:

He wrote... “I believe in a Zionism that faces facts, that exercises power with restraint, that sees the Jewish past as a lesson, not as a mystical imperative or as an insidious nightmare; that sees the Palestinian Arabs as Palestinian Arabs, not as the camouflaged reincarnation of the ancient tribes of Canaan or as a shapeless mass of humanity waiting for us to form it as we see fit; a Zionism also capable of seeing itself as others see it; and finally, a Zionism that that recognizes both the spiritual implications and the political consequences of the fact that this small tract of land is the homeland of two peoples fated to live facing each other, willy-nilly, because no God and no angel will come to judge between right and right. The lives of both, the lives of all of us, depend on the hard, torturous, and essential process of learning to know each other in the curious landscape of the beloved country.”

Some people thought that Amos Oz was a traitor, a label he was rather proud of. He knew that that job of a writer, an author, a journalist was not so different from that of a prophet. He felt called to preach to his country, to his government, to his people about the nobility of Jewish peoplehood, and to remind people of the essence of the Zionist dream. Like many Hebrew prophets, though, Oz was often repudiated by those in power. Particularly in these past several years, when he often went head-to-head with increasingly right wing governments. “I love Israel even when I cannot tolerate it” he once said. “”But if I am fated to fall in the street one day, I want to fall in the street in Israel. Not in London, not in Paris, not in Berlin, and not in New York. Here, people will pick me up. When I am back on my feet there will undoubtedly be quite a few who will want to see me fall again, but if I fall gain, I will be picked up again.”

Later in his life, Oz moved from Kibbutz Hulda in the center of the country, not far from where Yael is from in Gedera to Arad, a town in the desert where his son Daniel wouldn't be afflicted with asthma. Oz would begin each day by walking and clearing his head in the clear desert air, then descending into his basement study to think and read and write. He was prolific all the way to the end of his life...traveling the world to give speeches, publishing op-eds in the international press, collecting awards and prizes from various governments and universities, and of course writing novels, short stories, and essays about his life, about Israel, about

fanaticism, about peace. More of his books have been translated into other languages than any other Israeli writer.

Over the years, like many of his readers, I have been pushed and prodded by Amos Oz's sharp pen and hard-hitting ideas. And while I certainly did not agree with everything he stood for, I have always felt that he was a critical part of the conscience and consciousness of the Jewish people. I am grateful that he, like our Torah portion today, urged us to get out from under the complacency of the status quo. To be courageous, to speak and write and demand more and better of our leaders, to resist all forms of zealotry and extremism. Amy Wilentz wrote about Oz in *The Nation*: "Perhaps such a person rises up in every generation to defend the decency of his people."

With the death of Amos Oz, the Jewish people lost one of its great defenders. Let us pray that we will find others of his ilk...Uncompromisingly Jewish, devoutly Zionist, and profoundly humane.