

Amos Oz - Behind the Sound and Fury

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I love Israel even at times when I don't like it, even when I can't stand it.

I love it because I feel somewhat at home in Israel, even though it is a flawed home. It needs some mending. If Israel at times is disappointing, that is the nature of dreams--to be somewhat disappointing once they are fulfilled.

Israel is a dream come true. The only way to keep a dream rosy and intact is to never live it out. This is true of planting a garden, raising a family, living out a sexual fantasy, or building a nation.

Some people expected Israel to be a moral light unto the nations. Others expected it to be a nonstop macho show--Entebbe every week. Others wanted it to be an incarnation of the Jewish shtetl from Eastern Europe. They visit us and say "no bagels, no lox, no Jewish State."

Dreams can only remain wonderful as long as they don't come true. But the real Israel is not one dream come true, but a conglomeration of dreams, fantasies, blueprints and master plans. There were people who came here to humbly wait for the messiah. There were others, more ambitious, who intended to make the messiah come immediately. Others wanted to be the messiah, or to reconstruct the ancient kingdoms of David and Solomon with all their glory, or to build a Marxist paradise (so one day Stalin could visit and get the grand tour of a kibbutz, and the kibbutzniks could have a lengthy discussion with him and teach him once and for all what Marxism/Leninism is all about, and then, they fantasized, he would rise to his feet, say "You Jews did socialism better here than we did in Russia," and die of happiness). There were Europeans who hoped to rebuild Vienna or Prague in the heart of the Middle East, with good manners and tea and European decorum, music, peace and quiet between two and four in the afternoon, and a lot of Gamitlichkeit. Next door there were people who wanted this place to become a fifty-second state of the U.S. or a Scandinavian social democracy. The founders of my own kibbutz, Hulda, semi-religious social anarchists, maintained that it was time for the Jewish people to come back to Israel to create a loose federation of rural communities where the Jews would undergo a deep religious renewal, not in synagogue, but by being in constant touch with the elements of nature, by hard physical work and sharing

everything with each other. There was, in short, a rainbow of fantasies.

Zionism was an uneasy coalition of diverse dreams, and by definition it would have been impossible for all those dreams to have been fulfilled. Today, some are partially fulfilled, some forgotten, and some have turned into nightmares.

Israel is a fiery collection of arguments, and I like it this way, although it is no garden of roses. There is something very creative about this situation. Israel is a living open street seminar about Jewish heritage, about the meaning of Judaism, about morality, about the significance or marginality of holy places, about a hierarchy of different Jewish values. A whole nation has been immersed for the past thirty years in a debate which is superficially political or military but which is essentially ethical, historical, even theological about the kind of identity they want.

Outsiders say, "Can't you Israelis lower your voices a little bit when you disagree with each other? The noises that you are making are embarrassing us in front of our non-Jewish neighbors."

No way, no deal.

One of the consequences of being a citizen of an independent state of the Jewish people is that I feel free to conduct my argument at the top of my voice if I so choose and to hell with my neighbors. Israel belongs in a Fellini movie, not an Ingmar Bergman film. Hence the sound and the fury, the anger and sometimes the bad blood. When abroad, some of us peace-oriented Israelis are requested to shut up for the sake of unity. At least abroad, some American Jews say, we need to present a unified Jewish facade. I say to them, "Brilliant idea, let's present a unified facade. Why don't you people pretend to be Peace Now and keep your ideas to yourself, so that we all speak in a Peace Now voice and appear perfectly united?" But the only kind of unity they have in mind is for me to shut up for the sake of unity. For some bizarre reason, the only unity they have in mind is right-wing and Orthodox.

In Israel, every line at a bus stop is likely to catch a spark and turn into a fascinating, fiery street seminar, with total strangers arguing about politics, strategies, the Bible, morality, ethics, and the real purpose of God. While noisily disagreeing about metaphysics, they are elbowing their way to the top of the line. This is a vivacious culture--after all, culture is not just about spending money on opera.

Some impatient outsiders ask, "When are you going to give us a juicy little Jewish civil war?" They want the fight, the settlers shooting at the peaceniks, the Ashkenazi at the

Sephardi, the religious at the secular. I tell those people, "The Israeli civil war has been going on for seventy years, but it is mostly a verbal civil war. We fight by calling each other terrible names, thus inflicting cancer and heart attacks on each other."

Issues like the separation of Church and State have been settled in other countries through very bloody civil wars. Ours is relatively civilized by comparison. It is going to take a very long time to be resolved. But I think it won't be as bloody as other such struggles (think of how many tens of thousands of people died in the American civil war over establishing America's rules of the game). Another politician or writer might get assassinated. We are not immune, of course, to further nasty episodes of violence. But I don't think we are going to have a civil war in the honored tradition of the most civilized nations.

The assassination of Yitzchak Rabin was dark and immensely significant; yet what followed afterwards was equally significant. The next morning the whole nation was out in the streets, half mourning Rabin as a saint, the other half maintaining that Rabin was the worst traitor in all of Jewish history who deserved to face a court martial for treason. Although everyone was arguing with everyone, there was not a single recorded episode of violence--not a punch in the eye or a slap in the face. If the President of France had been shot, you'd see tanks in the streets of Paris tomorrow. The assassination was extremely un-Jewish; what followed was very Jewish.

We don't actually have a debate about "Who is a Jew?" It's really just over "Who is a rabbi?" To me, the answer is very simple: everyone is a rabbi. This is a nation of 5.9 million rabbis, teachers, prophets, Prime ministers, and messiahs. Everyone talks and no one listens (except for me--I listen sometimes, that is how I make a living). Who is a Jew? Everyone who is mad enough to call himself or herself a Jew is a Jew.

It's not for nothing that we never had a pope. If anyone would call herself or himself the Pope of the Jews, everybody would slap this Jewish pope on the back, saying "Hi, Pope, we don't know each other, but your uncle and my grandfather used to do business together in Minsk or Casablanca, so let me tell you once and for all what God really wants from us." Judaism is a game of interpretations and interpretations of interpretations. Every time the Jews live in submission, obedience, in blind religious discipline, rather than in open interpretation, there are bad times for Jews. Israel is facing huge problems, the most urgent being the feud with the Palestinians. But Orthodoxy is a digression, because it tries to restrict and excommunicate the freedom of

interpretation, the built-in argumentativeness which has been the soul of this culture. The worst part of the Israeli-Arab conflict might be over. Deep in their hearts, even the Right knows that there will be a partition, and, though they may fight over the boundaries, they know that there will be a Palestinian state. Gone are the days of total cognitive blocks between Israel and the Arabs, when the Arabs treated Israel as a passing infection, while many of us treated the Palestinian tragedy as a non-issue. When we can no longer use the Palestinian issue as a diversion, we will be faced with each other, a society full of screaming prophets. And that will present us with dangers and great changes. We will have a lot of work to do.

Then we will have to face our real issues: How do we deal with the disappointments of so many? How do we conduct the dialogue, between ourselves and also between ourselves and those Jews who wish to live elsewhere? How does one reconcile even a decent nation-state with ethical requirements? The nation-state is a crude instrument. It is not a handmade suit for Jewish culture or for the highest ethical standards.

I'm not an optimist but an activist. Israel at the moment is in deep crisis. But I refuse to share the somewhat whining despair of some of my fellow intellectuals in Tel Aviv as they face the fiftieth anniversary of the State. Their despair comes in part from the fact that intellectuals had a very formative role in the early years in Israel. Intellectuals had reason to feel that they were the composers and conductors of the orchestra. In recent years, we (including me, sometimes) are bewildered and angry at the shrinking role of the thinkers, the intellectuals, the poets, the moralizers. There was a certain attempt at harmonizing early Zionism, its requirements and aspirations, with the vision of the sensitive lot. Not so today. The intellectuals still have lots more influence here than they have in America or in most countries in the world, but nothing like what they felt they had forty or fifty years ago.

I belong by temperament to those who ask, "What do we need to do next?" I think I have the answer: what we ought to do, rather than search our souls about the shattering of the dream, is to win over the thirty to forty thousand middle-of-the-road Israelis who could be on our side, not only on issues of peace with the Palestinians, but also on issues of the separation of state and synagogue and the support for more democracy and for human and civil rights.

Many of our potential supporters would have been on our side but for the errors made by progressive forces who were often condescending and made fun of the legitimate

fears and apprehensions of many ordinary Israelis. Some of us peace activists have made fun of these fears and apprehensions, have treated insecurity as a sign of lack of intelligence, and thus have alienated many middle-of-the-road Israelis; that has been a grave error both morally and politically. We could win over another 50,000 Israelis--not Archie Bunker, but we could win Edith (we already have Michael and Gloria), if we try to reason with her, not to insult or shame her. We need to talk to her eye-to-eye. That is what I do, rather than go to the intellectual places in Tel Aviv to talk to other peacemakers about how terrible things are and how impotent we all are. I go to developing towns and to other places where I can talk to middle-of-the-road Israelis. The Arab citizens of the State of Israel have not been treated correctly. There can be no such thing as a Jewish state; it must be the State of the Jewish people and all its citizens, which means that Israeli Arabs will have the option to be full-scale citizens with all the rights and duties (including joining the Israeli army). Israel needs to look the Palestinian tragedy right in the eye and say, "We will do everything we can, short of committing suicide, to cure this tragedy."

I regard the clash between Israel and Palestine in 1948 as a tragedy because it was a clash between right and right. Both Palestinians and Israelis bear responsibility. It was a clash between two deeply injured, hysterical, terror-ridden nations. Neither side can be terribly proud of what they did in 1948. We have to see how we can heal these wounds by dealing with the Palestinian refugees--those refugees ought to be taken out of the refugee camps now, even before we know the exact boundaries of a future Palestine. Israel and Palestine may live forever with different narratives of what really happened in 1948. But when I see a car accident, I don't ask who caused the accident, but who is bleeding most heavily; it is they who deserve the most urgent attention. Today it is those refugees living in the camps, they and the victims of terrorism in the streets of Israel and the victims of oppression in the West Bank, who need our attention. This, not the blame, is urgent. There is enough blame for everyone.
