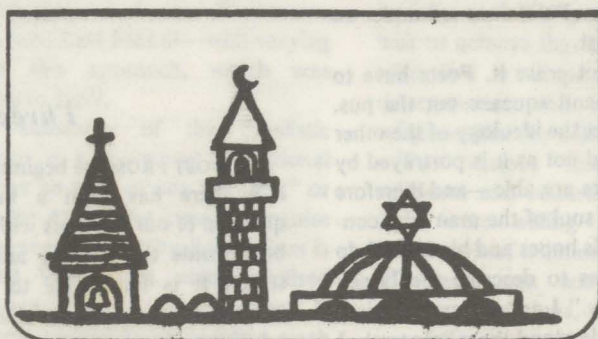


Amos Oz

# From Jerusalem to Cairo





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## Escaping from the Shadow of the Past

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THIS is not a message with yet another "programme for peace." It is not written by a politician, and it contains no new proposals about borders, autonomy, or security. I hope that politicians on all sides will find in their hearts the patience, imagination, courage and wisdom needed to bring the peace agreement to full and final fruition. That is their task.

There is one task which the politicians cannot perform and which they are under no obligation to attempt, and that is to scrutinise the past, the sources of hatred and the well-springs of suspicion, with the aim of clearing away the stereotypes and understanding the soul of the other side. This task falls to the lot of the poets and thinkers, the writers and intellectuals. The politicians must not be allowed to touch the painful past, in case they make of it an explosive which is liable to endanger both the present and the future. Politicians are under an obligation to erase the past.

But intellectuals cannot erase it. Poets have to reopen the old wounds and squeeze out the pus. Thinkers have to interpret the ideology of the other side, as it is in reality and not as it is portrayed by the propagandists. Writers are able—and therefore obliged—to lay bare the soul of the man who confronts them, his beliefs, his hopes and his fears. I do not in this article profess to describe the Israel-Arab conflict "objectively." I am not an historian, and I do not claim to understand the whole truth. I

am a Jew, an Israeli, a Zionist, who belongs to the moderate Left in Israel. I have twice taken part in wars. I was privileged to witness President Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, the signing of the peace agreement and the exchange of ambassadors between Israel and Egypt. I hope to see agreements signed with all the other Arab states, and a fair solution found to the problem of the Palestinians. I am committed to the peace and security of my country. I shall try to explain here a few of the basic attitudes (psychological, ideological, and political) of my fellow countrymen. I hope one day to read a similar document by an Egyptian intellectual or a Palestinian writer, trying to explain to us, not the "minimal conditions for peace" (that is the task of the politicians), but the feelings and attitudes from which the conflict derives, and which will have to change if peace is to be achieved.

### Three Basic Attitudes

ALMOST FROM the beginning of modern Zionism there has been a fierce debate over the question of our relations with our Arab neighbours, both inside the country and in the neighbouring states. It is impossible to describe here all the various nuances in this debate. I shall try to give a schematic sketch of three fundamental tendencies.

1. The militant approach may be termed, in the phrase of Vladimir Jabotinsky, the "iron wall" theory. The Jews, according to this approach, are returning to the land of their forefathers so as to inherit it. It is up to us to create facts and to build up our strength, until the Arabs are compelled to submit to the Zionist reality because of its superior power. There is no hope of compromise or understanding between the two sides until the Jews have erected the "iron wall" and the Arabs have understood that they are unable to break through

it. Only then will the victors be in a position to treat the losers with magnanimity. This approach has been, for most of the period of the Zionist enterprise, that of a minority.

2. The romantic approach, which has also been a minority position in the history of Zionism, is represented by the *Brit Shalom* movement and others like it, and by groups which have inherited its main doctrines. *Brit Shalom* maintained that without the "consent" of the Arabs Zionism is either immoral or impossible, or both. Martin Buber and his disciples believed that Zionism conferred a blessing on the Arabs and that we ought to explain this blessing to them, persuade them to be enamoured of the Zionist enterprise, and only then proceed with the enterprise itself. This movement was prepared to entertain such ideas as a multinational state, a supranational state, a federal state, a confederal state, and so on.

The fate of the members of *Brit Shalom* and their successors was a tragic one. Internally they were accused of obsequiousness and even treachery, while the Palestinians saw them as crafty cynics who were out to cheat the Arabs by camouflaging their real intentions. The movement never succeeded in convincing either the Israelis or the Arabs.

3. The intermediate position, which—forsaking "historical objectivity"—I propose to call the "realistic approach", is that of the founding fathers of Zionist social democracy and the leaders of the Zionist bourgeoisie. Chaim Weizmann, David Ben Gurion, and Levi Eshkol—with varying emphases—shared this approach, which was dominant at least up to 1967.

What is the substance of the "realistic approach"? Zionism is a movement of national liberation, which has no need of any "consent" or "agreement" from the Arabs. But it must recognise that the conflict between us and the Palestinians is not a cheap Wild Western in which civilised "goodies" are fighting against native "baddies." It is more like a Greek tragedy. It represents a clash of two conflicting rights. The Palestinian Arabs have a strong and legitimate claim, and the Israelis must recognise this, without this recognition leading us into self denial or feelings of guilt. We are bound to accept a painful compromise, and admit that the Land of Israel is the homeland of two nations, and we must agree to its partition in one form or another.

As I have said, the "realistic approach" used to be the main line of the Zionist enterprise. Between 1967 and President Anwar Sadat's visit in 1977 the

"militant approach" gained a good deal of ground. At the moment Israeli public opinion is divided. The party divisions in Israel have never precisely expressed the differences between these approaches, and even today the party political map does not reflect accurately the relative weights of the various tendencies.

### Right vs. Right

ZIONISM is a movement of national liberation. This point is not really understood even by our friends, while our foes tend to reject it angrily. It is this anger that I am trying to defuse. The Jews are not like other victims of enslavement and oppression. We did not wake up in our own land after a long period of oppression and slavery to throw out our oppressors and regain our independence. We do not fit into the usual model of "national liberation." For upwards of a thousand years this land was inhabited by Arabs. It was not they, but the Romans, who crushed our independence. It was not they who banished our forefathers into exile. One cannot say that we came here to recover from the Arabs what the Arabs took from us by force.

In any case, Zionism—according to the interpretation which I accept—is not a movement to liberate territory but a movement to liberate people. The word "liberation" can only be meaningfully applied to people. The purpose of Zionism was to achieve the national liberation of the Jews who had a desperate need of national self-determination and could no longer exist as a religious minority within other nations.

For various historical reasons—emotional, religious, and cultural—the only place where the Jews were willing and able to establish the framework of a nation was the Land of Israel. And this land was not empty. Why were these emotional, religious, and cultural ties still so strong even after thousands of years? Who would be rash enough to attempt to explain the various national migrations which have taken place in history? Any one-dimensional explanation, be it theological or Marxist-materialist, poetic or strategic or sociological, appears petty and ridiculous in relation to the enormity of the phenomenon itself. throngs of people migrate from various places to one particular place, to become a nation. And this place is not comfortable or rich; it does not offer promising political or economic conditions; and yet the migration does not diminish. Even the migra-

THIS is the first of a series of articles discussing the problems of the "Peace Process". AMOS OZ is a prominent Israeli novelist whose books have won a wide audience for him throughout the West. In England his novels have been published by Chatto & Windus and by Fontana in paperback editions: "My Michael" (1972), "Elsewhere Perhaps" (1973), "Touch the Water Touch the Wind" (1975), "The Hill of Evil Counsel" and his latest collection of short stories, "Where the Jackals Howl", which appeared in 1981.



tions of birds or the movements of animals from an old home to a new one, or from the new back to the old, are phenomena which have given rise to specific scientific theories; but who would dare to claim that he had found one simple, satisfying explanation?

THE AGONIES OF the Jews in most of the countries where they were dispersed, especially in the last hundred years, shattered their hopes of divine salvation, as well as their hopes of being rescued by liberal, humanist, or socialist progress.

There were some Jews who, because of suffering and persecution, abandoned their Judaism.

There were some Jews who accepted suffering and persecution as part of the natural world order, as the will of God.

There were some Jews who had learnt to flee from refuge to refuge, to wander from country to country.

And there were many who decided that the only way out was to become a nation like all the others. They felt they had to return to their home, and acquire what any nation has: territory and sovereignty.

For these Jews "home" meant the Land of Israel. One may attempt to explain this in Marxist or in mystical terms; the fact is that those Jews who had made up their minds to return home came to Israel. Like a bird coming back to its old nest or a wounded animal returning to its lair.

But the founders of "realistic Zionism" knew that the Arabs would not accept this phenomenon, whether through force of arms (the "iron wall") or through fine promises (the "romantic approach"). They perceived the elements of tragedy which are woven into the conflict between two rights.

WHAT IS THE RIGHT on the Zionist side? It is the right of a drowning man who takes hold of the only available raft, even if it means pushing aside the legs of the people who are already sitting on it so as to make some room for himself... so long as he only asks them to move up, and does not demand that they get off the raft or drown in the sea. A Zionism which asks for a part of the land is morally justified; a Zionism which asks the Palestinians to renounce their identity and give up the whole land is not justified.

When right conflicts with right, one possible solution—as in a Greek tragedy—is the sword. The other possible solution is a sad, painful, and inconsistent compromise. Such a compromise is

only possible between an inconsistent Zionist and an inconsistent Palestinian, who are both prepared to abandon part of their right for the sake of something which is more precious than right: life. The heroes of tragedies, people who are caught up in a complex of conflicting rights, pursue and destroy each other until the stage is covered with corpses. People who demand absolute justice choose death. The price of life, whether in a family conflict or a national one, is compromise and partial renunciation.

I blame the Palestinian national movement for insensitivity to the suffering of the Jews, for callousness ("It's a European problem which doesn't concern the Arabs") and for lack of imagination; but I do not blame them for refusing to welcome the Jews with a deferential bow and hand over the keys of the land.

I blame the militant Zionists for disregarding the identity of the Palestinian population; but I cannot blame the Jews for seeing the Land of Israel as their last possible life-raft.

All these considerations lead me to accept the moral (and not merely pragmatic) rightness of the idea of partitioning the land between its two nations. The task of fixing the borders of the partitioned land I leave to the politicians.

### What is Delaying a Comprehensive Solution?

ON BOTH SIDES there are elements which refuse to respect reality. On our side we have the militant approach, the "iron wall" theory. On the Palestinian side there exists an obsession with "absolute justice." I have repeatedly stated in the course of numerous debates that I refuse to regard the PLO as a "Palestinian liberation movement." Not because they shed innocent blood—who has not shed innocent blood in the pursuit of liberation from foreign domination?—but because the PLO is not content simply to liberate the Palestinians. It wants to liberate me as well. That is the long and the short of it. It is as if the FLN had decided not to be satisfied with the liberation of Algeria but wished to liberate France from the shackles of Catholicism. Or as if the Viet Cong had decided to liberate America from the yoke of Capitalism. Arafat claims to want to "liberate the Jews in Palestine from the Zionist yoke." This is an absurd position which has no precedent in any liberation movement. Arafat claims the right to determine my

identity for me. He wishes to liberate me from myself.

If the Palestinians were to come along tomorrow with a proposal to recognise us and our independence and our nationhood on condition that we recognised them and their independence, I should be prepared to embark at once on the painful and difficult negotiations towards a peace settlement. For 50 years now, the "realistic tendency" in Israel has been prepared to accept the partition of the land between its two nations, though with a heavy heart. But the PLO does not recognise the fact of the existence of two nations. It trumpets forth slogans about "handing back the stolen lands" and about "absolute justice" (understood in its own terms).

This attitude takes on a frightening dimension if we compare it to that of the militant Israelis who are not prepared to recognise the existence of a Palestinian people.

There is, however, no simple symmetry in this opposition. Good Israelis are prepared to envisage partition, sensible Arabs are prepared to envisage mutual recognition; but the extremists on both sides make no allowance for compromise.

There is no symmetry: the fundamental position of the PLO resembles the militant position in Israel. There is no parallel on the Palestinian side to the realistic position in Israel. That is why so far we have heard no real voice from the Palestinian side supporting partition as a fundamental and right solution (not as a stratagem or a stage on the road to the destruction of Israel).

So it is too with the "theatre critics" of the conflict, our European friends who judge us all from a safe distance. They say that the Arabs (Egypt excepted) have a "Saladdin complex" and the Israelis have a "Massada complex." The Palestinians suffer from an obsession with destruction and the Israelis from an obsession with insecurity. Conclusion: both sides are slightly deranged.

I REJECT this comparison. There is no symmetry between a destruction complex and an insecurity complex. There is no symmetry between the position of Begin (which I oppose) and that of Arafat, Assad, and Saddam Hussein. A destruction complex and an insecurity complex are not on the same level, either from the moral or the psychological point of view. Moreover, the Israeli insecurity complex is, to a large extent, a product of the "Saladdin complex" of part of the Arab world.

There is no alternative to reconciling oneself to

the fact that as a result of an historical cataclysm which has taken place over the past 70 years the land is divided between two populations with distinct national identities, neither of which is able—or entitled—to eliminate the other. President Sadat and his people realised this, created a conceptual revolution, and also brought about a conceptual revolution among us. With President Sadat's visit to Jerusalem many of the "militant Zionists" softened; and by means of this great emotional breakthrough Israel gained recognition and peace and Egypt recovered the Sinai Peninsula and gained peace. A similar emotional breakthrough needs to come about in the rest of the Arab countries, and first and foremost among the Palestinians, before we can celebrate the end of the whole conflict.

### The Shadow of the Past

THE REAL CALAMITY is that both sides are unable to look each other in the eyes, to look into each other's souls. The leaders of Israel and Egypt have signed a peace agreement; the Israeli and Egyptian peoples have not yet arrived at a cordial mutual understanding. Here, perhaps, is the key to the depth of the tragedy.

What does the Israeli see when he looks at the Arab? Frequently he sees the shadow of his persecutors and oppressors in the grim past: Cossacks, dressed now in Arab robes and headcloths, come to continue the work of the pogrom-makers in previous generations, to murder, rape and pillage.

What does the Arab see when he looks at the Israelis? Frequently he sees in them the shadow of his former persecutors and oppressors. Not persecuted Jews trying to be a nation like all the rest, but a continuation of the wily, arrogant, European colonialist and imperialist, come to enslave the East and exploit its wealth by means of technological superiority.

The shadow of the past hangs over this whole conflict. It is Europe, which shed the blood of the Jews, persecuted and annihilated them, Europe which oppressed and humiliated and exploited the Arabs, that is responsible for the situation where Israelis and Arabs are unable to look into each other's eyes and souls without seeing the shadow of the past. The Arabs and the Israelis are both peoples who have experienced humiliation, subjugation, and suffering. But it is only in the



framework of Marxist mythology, or in the plays of Bertolt Brecht, that the persecuted and humiliated become "brothers" and forge links of mutual solidarity. In the lives of individuals and of nations the fiercest conflicts of all are often those between two victims of the same persecutor. The Arabs and the Israelis are two nations who have suffered anguish and humiliation at the hands of Europe. It is tragic that each looks at the other and sees only the face of their common enemy.

FEAR AND SUSPICION beget foolishness.

"If you agree to accept our formula", many Arabs say to Israel, "we shall spread the shelter of our protection over you, you will be free to worship in your own way, and the sword of Islam will guard you from all harm. . . ." Such words fuel the flames of the psychological trauma of the Israelis, because they recall what was said to us in the past, with terrible consequences.

Meanwhile the Israelis, for their part, often say something no less obtuse and dangerous to the Arabs: "If only you will accept our peace formula, we shall come to all the Arab countries with our sophisticated scientific and technological expertise, we shall improve your agriculture, set up industries, and bring you into the modern age."

It seems to me that remarks like these from the Israelis only fuel the flames of the Arab trauma. The Arab nations have heard this tune before, precisely from their most wily and brutal oppressors.

And so, before our eyes, both sides are adding fuel to the flames of the suspicion, fear and nightmares of the past. If only it were possible to banish this horror to the place where it belongs: the stage. Tragedy. Comedy. Farce.

It is the propagandists on both sides who are responsible for this idiocy. But blame also attaches

to the poets, the writers, and the intellectuals who do not attempt to break down the barriers of the stereotypes created by propaganda. In Egypt, in Israel, and among the Palestinians there ought to be thinkers who can understand the mind of the other side and will tell the politicians and the propagandists what must not be said and how to avoid reopening old wounds. The Israeli does not want to hear remarks about the protection of Islam or about freedom of religion within the Arab world. And the Arabs do not wish Israel to come and modernise them and change their way of life and their values.

Is it possible that writers and ideologists on both sides will perform this task? Will the poets undertake to do what is beyond the power of the politicians, to delve into the depths of the other's soul, to voice his fears and traumas, to concern themselves not with questions of borders and arrangements but with questions of suspicions and anxieties? What is the reason for each side characterising the other in terms of treachery, cunning, savagery, and arrogance? What are the roots of the sense of injustice and humiliation on both sides?

ABOVE ALL, we are all now in need of a measure of mutual sensitivity and creative imagination, so that agreement between politicians can open the door to reconciliation between peoples. Sensitivity and creative imagination will help us to find a way which does not endanger the existence of Israel and does not involve exploitation and humiliation for the Arabs.

Is such a way possible? I have no simple answer. But the real question is this: Is it possible that there is *no* such way—and in that case, where will it all end?