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**Pictures from  
the Other Israel**

IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL, by Amos Oz. Translated by Maurie Goldberg-Bartura. San Diego and New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 257 pp. \$12.95.

In October and November 1982, following the most controversial military campaign in Israeli history, Amos Oz set out to take the pulse of his country by talking to people from different walks of life. The result, *In the Land of Israel*, is a report of this journey through the human landscape of "The Land."

The essays in this volume had already attracted a great deal of interest when they appeared as a series in *Davar*, the newspaper of the Histadrut, Israel's labor federation. Oz uses his literary skills to create highly polished portraits of the people who live in this land of harsh landscapes and brilliant light. The picture presented is both troubling and unforgettable.

It may seem strange that Oz, who is one of Israel's foremost literary figures, would need to rediscover his own country. He could hardly be more "Israeli": not merely a native and an author, Oz is a kibbutz member, a frequent spokesman for Peace Now, and well-known as a standard-bearer of the labor Zionist movement that has led the country to independence. But Israel has changed after 15 years of occupying the West Bank and Gaza, six years of rule by the Likud and, finally, the war in Lebanon. Not only is it no longer the place it used to be, but Israelis like Oz have seen the Israel they tried to build unravel.

OZ BEGINS HIS JOURNEY in Jerusalem. In the neighborhood where he grew up he encounters the rebirth of the Diaspora in the heart of the Jewish state. "The Kingdom of *Yiddishkeit*" spreads out from the ultra-Orthodox enclave of Mea Shearim. "Yiddish is the language of the street. Zionism was here once and was repelled." Anti-Zionist sentiment is strong in these neighborhoods, despite the destruction of the Holocaust, for these people believe that Jews should piously await the Messiah's arrival. The local graffiti read: "There is no Kingdom but the Kingdom of the Messiah" and, next to a Swastika, "Death to the Zionist Hitlerites." Oz

concludes that "only Hitler and the Messiah are alive and well here, burning like twin pillars of fire."

Not only in Mea Shearim, it seems, but elsewhere as well. In what is probably the book's most shocking essay, Oz encounters a self-described "Judeo-Nazi" in one of the old and well-established agricultural villages. Full of hatred for "Zhids"—Jews like Oz who are "tender and delicate"—this "Judeo-Nazi" believes that "a people that let itself be slaughtered and destroyed . . . is a worse criminal than its tormentors. Worse than the Nazis." And that man is pleased with the war in Lebanon, not only because Israel has further expanded its borders—"the dirty work of Zionism isn't finished yet"—but because it has produced a "bonus" of increased anti-Semitism, which will force Jews to leave the Diaspora for Israel. Oz is horrified and dumbfounded by this man and can only wonder whether "Hitler not only killed the Jews but also infected them with his poison."

While Hitler is alive for the "Judeo-Nazi," the Messiah's footsteps are heard by members of Gush Emunim (the "Bloc of the Faithful"), the movement that spearheaded the settlement drive in the West Bank. Oz is a known opponent, yet they openly speak with him in their villages perched on the rocky hills of Judea and Samaria.

- Gush Emunim has attracted the support of many young Israelis, particularly those educated in the religious public schools. "The Land of Israel" was promised to the Jewish people by God, they tell Oz, and "what the Lord, Blessed be He, gave us we may not give away as a gift." The redemption of the People of Israel is tied to the redemption of the Land of Israel; therefore, "the war over the Land of Israel is a war over life and death, and it is still very far from over." The Arabs who live in the land do so not by right but by the mercy of its Jewish owners. Not unlike Khomeini, Gush Emunim rejects modern Western culture as foreign to the Jews, disdaining secular Israelis for their decadence.

Precisely because they are ideologically motivated, Gush Emunim poses a serious threat to Oz's Zionism. While his views are implicit in the book, Oz presents them explicitly in only one essay, "An Argument on Life and Death." This is the political and philosophical climax of the volume, after which the angry tone abates.

IN AN IMPASSIONED POLEMIC delivered in a West Bank settlement, Oz defends the principles and actions of the labor movement, which created the kibbutzim and founded the country. He advocates

a cultural pluralism based on the encounter between Jews and Western humanism that will result in an open, creative, just, and progressive society. Oz uses religious terminology to attack the cults of militarism, statism, power, and "the integrity of the Land of Israel": "The conversion of statehood and its trappings from a means to an end, to an object of ritual and worship was, as far as I am concerned, idolatry."

Oz warns that territorial compromise with the Arabs is essential to Israel's future. "You people are convinced that to relinquish Judea and Samaria would endanger the existence of the State of Israel. I think that annexation of these regions endangers the existence of the State of Israel." For Oz this is no mere difference of opinion, but "a controversy over the nature of Zionism and even the meaning of Jewish destiny." He is worried that "if my hosts succeed in their cause, they may drag both me and my children with them, to kill and die in a perpetual and unnecessary war, or perhaps turn Israel into a monster like Belfast, Rhodesia, or South Africa." He therefore concludes with the question that he repeatedly asks in his interviews: "If the price of a Greater Land of Israel is to tear this nation apart and create a life-and-death issue, is it worth this price?"

- While the ideological right wing poses the most serious threat to Oz's vision of Israel, the Oriental (Sephardic) Jews provided the mass support that put the Likud in power. The conflict between Ashkenazim and Sephardim may not be ideological, but it constitutes one of Israel's most explosive social problems and the labor movement's most critical failure. Not surprisingly, one of Oz's most depressing visits is paid to Beit Shemesh, a town in the Jerusalem foothills, not far from his kibbutz. Most of Beit Shemesh's inhabitants are Jews who immigrated from Arab countries. Here hatred for the Labor party, the kibbutzim, and the Ashkenazic establishment runs deep. This anger and its causes are given vent: the people of Beit Shemesh remember with bitterness how they were housed in slums and shantytowns when they arrived, were treated as second-class citizens and were left no option but to do menial labor, and how their self-respect was torn away.

"You love the Arabs as much as you hate the Oriental Jews," they tell Oz. However unideological for many Oriental Jews, this perspective results in a strong motivation to hold onto the West Bank and Gaza: "If they give back the territories, the Arabs will stop coming to work, and then and there you'll put us back into the dead-end jobs, like

before. If for no other reason, we won't let you give back those territories."

- If the Oriental Jews feel they have been treated as second-class citizens, then the Arabs who live in the Land of Israel might feel they're third-class, or worse. Nevertheless, the Palestinians with whom Oz speaks are moderate in comparison to many right-wing Jews.

The views of the Palestinian intelligentsia are expressed by the staff of the East Jerusalem newspaper *Al-Fajr*. Oz finds these Arab journalists prepared to accept territorial compromise and co-existence with Israel. *Al-Fajr's* literary editor claims, "My hatred is dead. Now I have only bitterness and anger, but no more hatred. There's nothing we can do about it: here in this land we are welded together, Jews and Arabs, forever."

Meanwhile, the sentiments of the Palestinian working class are expressed by two young men Oz meets in a Ramallah café.

Everyone in the West Bank wants peace—the big shots and the little people. Write: They're sick of wars. Why should they die? Write that the Arabs deserve a piece [of land], too. Don't write "the Arabs." Write "the Palestinians"; that's more correct.

The final word belongs to an old Arab farmer:

Write that the land doesn't belong to the Jews or to the Arabs. The land is God's. Whoever finds favor in His eyes will receive His land. God alone decides. And whoever does evil will pay the price: God will pass over him and forget him.

- God also figures in the perspective of Father Dubois, a long-time Jerusalem resident who teaches philosophy at the Hebrew University. Calm and compassionate, Father Dubois believes that throughout Israel, but particularly in Jerusalem, a deep struggle between good and evil is taking place, "perhaps the central battle of our time, in universal terms." He suggests that the Jews are being tested, and that the primary struggle is among the Jews themselves.

Every person who has the Spirit of God in him loves the People of Israel and prays for its triumph in the struggle—for its triumph over itself. There is great hope, and perhaps that is why the Devil is angry and interferes in almost everything here. But in the place where the Devil is at work the Spirit of God can be found. Surely the Lord is in this place.

OZ DOES NOT FINISH his pilgrimage in Jerusalem, but in two rather unlikely locales that embody his vision of a "sane" Zionism: the quaint farming

village of Bat Shlomo and the new port city of Ashdod. Through his discussion with an elderly couple in Bat Shlomo, Oz portrays the original Zionist dream of Jews returning to the land, becoming farmers, and living honestly by the sweat of their brow. This, of course, is in sharp contrast to the Israel of today, where the stock market is a national obsession, Arabs do the menial work, and an artificial prosperity has been contrived through a ballooning foreign debt.

The labor Zionist dream symbolized by Bat Shlomo has been realized and abandoned; like the town itself, those who still believe in it seem like museum pieces. But Oz finds a new vision of Israel's future in the development town of Ashdod,

a small Mediterranean city, a pleasant city, unpretentious, with a port and a lighthouse, and a power station and factories and many landscaped avenues. . . . Ashdod is what there is. And she is not quite the grandiose fulfillment of the vision of the Prophets and of the dream of generations; not quite a world premier, but simply a city on a human scale.

*In the Land of Israel* claims neither to be comprehensive nor representative: there are certainly more moderate Israelis and more extreme Palestinians than Oz has portrayed here. But his aim is to reveal what has changed in the last few years; he explores the extremes in order to define the dimensions of the political, ideological, and social conflicts afflicting the people who live in "The Land" today.

One may wonder why Oz lent the power of his pen to ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionists, "Judeo-Nazis," messianic fundamentalists, Palestinian nationalists, and angry Sephardim—who all are his opponents.

Oz's decision to first publish these essays in *Davar* provides a clue. During the 1930s and 1940s—the golden age of the labor movement—*Davar* played a decisive role in shaping the culture of the Yishuv (the Jewish community in the Land of Israel). Oz clearly sees himself as the heir to this tradition, within which literature was "mobilized" in an ideological struggle to mold the culture and politics of the Jewish homeland. Today, when the ideological conflict is greater than at any time since 1948, Oz's side is on the defensive. These essays are directed first and foremost at his own constituency—the kibbutzniks and Labor party functionaries who are virtually the only people who read *Davar* today. The riveting portrayals of their sworn opponents are meant to awaken them to this new Israel, to show them exactly what they are up against, to shake them from passive resignation into action.

The question Oz leaves in doubt is whether his modest and reasonable vision of Ashdod stands a chance against passionate fanatics who put their faith in guns, believe God is on their side, and are certain that the Messiah is at the gate. □