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# REVIEW

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## *Promise of the Promised Land*

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### IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL

By Amos Oz, translated by Maurie Goldberg-Bartura  
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, a Heien and Kurt Wolff Book, \$12.95

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REVIEWED BY RON H. FELDMAN

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The quote below opens the most shocking of the interviews conducted by Amos Oz in his new book, "In the Land of Israel":

*"As far as I'm concerned, you can call me whatever you like. Call me a monster, Call me a murderer; but kindly indicate that I do not hate Arabs. On the contrary. Personally, I feel much*

*better among them — particularly the Bedouins — than I feel among the Zhids. . . As far as I'm concerned,*

*See Page 10*

## 'ISRAEL'

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*you can call the State of Israel by any pejorative you like. Call it Judeo-Nazi. . .I'm not looking to the gentiles for admiration and I don't need their love. But I don't need it from your kind of Jew, either. I want to survive . . .If anyone raises a hand against my children, I'll destroy him — and his children. . .and I don't give a damn if he's a Christian or a Moslem or a Jew or a pagan."*

Is this the voice of Israel? No, but it may be the voice of what can perhaps be called the "new Israel," those elements typified by Ariel Sharon, the former Defense Minister who led Israel into the ill-fated Lebanon adventure. Oz himself is both horrified and dumbfounded by this self-described "Judeo-Nazi" he is interviewing and wonders whether "Hitler not only killed the Jews but also infected them with his poison."

**A**mos Oz has gained an international reputation as one of Israel's foremost writers, and is best known to Americans through such novels and short story collections as "My Michael" and "The Hill of Evil Council." In Israel, however, he is equally well known as an essayist and spokesman for the left wing opposition. Like many Israelis, Oz believed from the start that the least successful and least popular military campaign in Israel's history would not be about "Peace for the Galilee" but about the future disposition of the West Bank. The outcome of this issue will determine Israel's fate, and Oz had this in mind when he set out to take the pulse of his deeply troubled country last autumn, following the summer's battles.

The people Oz interviews on his journey don't constitute a "representative" cross-section of Israeli society, but neither were they chosen at random. Oz wants to show what has changed, and he mainly portrays those sectors that are either new or have grown in power and numbers over the last few years. This isn't mere reportage, however; Oz didn't tape these interviews, but reconstructed them from notes and memory. The resulting images are more literary than literal, and the voices evoked possess that quality of fiction which makes them sound more realistic than the mere reality of a recording. The outcome is an incomparable exploration of the human and spiritual terrain of "The Land of Israel."

Beginning in Jerusalem, where he grew up, Oz encounters anti-Zionist Orthodox Jews who have returned the spirit of the ghetto to the heart of Israel. Even stronger than their antipathy to secular Israelis such as Oz is their hatred for the religious Jewish settlers of the West Bank, whom they consider to be false messianists. The settlers believe that "The Land" was promised to the Jews by God, that the "redemption" of The People of Israel is directly dependent on the "redemption" of The Land of Israel, and that all the difficulties encountered are but the birth pangs of the Messiah.

It is no accident that Oz presents his own passion-

ately argued views in the context of a lecture he was invited to give at one of the most die-hard settlements, for he sees these Jewish messianists as the most significant threat to his own vision of Israel.

While Oz's ideological opponents may be those who believe that God and guns are on their side, the mass electoral support for the current government comes from Jews who immigrated from Arab countries after Israel gained independence in 1948. Oz has a painful encounter in a small development town, where he is subjected to the pent-up anger of those Jews who feel the Labor Party establishment discriminated and oppressed them during Labor's nearly 30-year rule.

In contrast to this anger is the relative moderation of the Palestinians with whom Oz speaks. They are prepared to recognize the State of Israel but demand reciprocal recognition of their own rights. As the literary editor of a major East Jerusalem newspaper tells Oz, "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."

Certainly there are more extreme Palestinians and more moderate Jews than those to whom Oz introduces us. But Israel has changed in the 16 years since the Six-Day War and in the six years of Begin's rule. Today the humanist vision that inspired both Israel's founders and the rest of the world is on the defensive, retreating in the face of the processes that have occurred during the years of forced rule over a hostile population. Israel is now a highly polarized society in crisis, and Oz plumbs the depths of that crisis by defining its extremes.

It is symbolic that Oz's pilgrimage, which begins in Jerusalem, ends in the new town of Ashdod, "a pleasant city, unpretentious, with a port and a lighthouse, and a power station and factories and many landscaped avenues. Not pretending to be Paris or Zurich or aspiring to be Jerusalem. A city planned by social democrats: without imperial boulevards, without monuments, without grandiose merchants' homes." Ashdod, rooted in mundane reality, is Oz's vision of Israel's future. Counseling moderation, he calls for a rejection of messianic expectations on all sides as the only way to create a livable country:

"Perhaps we should take smaller bites, relinquish the totality of the Land for the sake of internal and external peace. Concede heavenly Jerusalem for the sake of the Jerusalem of the slums, waive messianic salvation for the sake of small, gradual reforms, forgo messianic fervor for the sake of prosaic sobriety. . . Patience, I say. There is no shortcut."

The question left unanswered is whether there is enough time for Oz's modest vision of Ashdod to prevail against zealots who believe the Messiah is at the gate. Nearly 2000 years ago the zealots were victorious — and Jerusalem was destroyed. ■

*Former Israel resident Ron H. Feldman edited and introduced "The Jew as Pariah," a collection of essays by Hannah Arendt.*