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fania oz-salzberger

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jewsandwords

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# jewsandwords

AMOS OZ AND FANIA OZ-SALZBERGER

A companion volume to the Posen Library  
of Jewish Culture and Civilization



Yale

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How odd  
Of God  
To choose  
The Jews.  
—William Norman Ewer

Not so odd: the Jews chose God.  
—Anon.

The Jews chose God and took his law  
*Or* made God up, then legislated.  
What did come first we may not know  
But eons passed, and they're still at it:  
Enlisting reasoning, not awe,  
And leaving nothing un-debated.

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## preface

This book is an essay. It is a nonfiction, speculative, raw, and occasionally playful attempt to say something a bit new on a topic of immense pedigree. We offer you our personal take on one core aspect of Jewish history: the relationship of Jews with words.

The authors are a father and a daughter. One is a writer and literary scholar, the other a historian. We have discussed and disputed topics relevant to this book ever since one of us was about three years old. Nevertheless, our coauthorship warrants some justification.

The best way to account for our teamwork is to spell up front what this essay says. It says that Jewish history and peoplehood form a unique continuum, which is neither ethnic nor political. To be sure, our history includes ethnic and political lineages, but they are not its prime arteries. Instead, the national and cultural genealogy of the Jews has always depended on the intergenerational transmittal of verbal content. It is about faith, of course, but even more effectively it is about

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texts. Significantly, the texts have long been available in writing. Tellingly, controversy was built into them from the very start. At its best, Jewish reverence has an irreverent edge. At its best, Jewish self-importance is tinged by self-examination, sometimes scathing, sometimes hilarious. While scholarship matters enormously, family matters even more. These two mainstays tend to overlap. Fathers, mothers, teachers. Sons, daughters, students. Text, question, dispute. We don't know about God, but Jewish continuity was always paved with words.

For this very reason, our history excels as a story. Indeed, several histories and numerous stories are intertwined in the annals of the Jews. Many scholars and writers have braved this maze. Here we are offering a joint walk through some its pathways, entwining the gazes of a novelist and a historian, and adding our own interlocution to its myriad conversing voices.

In this slender volume no attempt was made to run the gamut of Jewish works, even the best known or the most influential. There are numerous texts we have not read. The essayistic genre can deliver dense and panoramic discussions of vast topics, but it is also particularly prone to selective reading, personal bias, and an arrogant grope for generalization. Regardless of such generic faults, we take full responsibility for each of these shortcomings, and for many others the reader may encounter. Here is another thing our book tries to spell out: in Jewish tradition every reader is a proof-reader, every student a critic, and every writer, including the Author of the universe, begs a great many questions.

If this set of suggestions is persuasive, then our joint father-and-daughter project might make sense.

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## acknowledgments

Naturally, the wisdom and advice of many people have flown into this small book, as has excellent criticism. Our first and foremost thanks go to our family: Nily Oz, Eli Salzberger, and Galia Oz gave this manuscript their sharp readings and shrewd comments; Daniel Oz, Dean Salzberger, and Nadav Salzberger took part in many a meaningful, gritty, and deeply enjoyable intergenerational conversation.

Felix Posen came up with the very idea for this project, and both he and his son Daniel offered unfailing friendship, dedication, and good cheer. It may not seem typical of two native Hebrew speakers like ourselves to engage with their own cultural legacies in English, but we feel that this book belongs squarely and intimately with the Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization. Many fine scholars are at work on the Library's ten volumes, and their work has inspired ours. We share the Library's broad vision, which is by no means a narrow agenda, of Jewish history as a complex and

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multifarious trove of human voices crisscrossed by significant continuums. The wealth of cultural diversity does not trump the presence of unifying principles. Religion is but one of them.

Several colleagues and friends were kind enough to read and critique the manuscript. They saved us from factual mistakes, errors of judgment, and similar mishaps; those still remaining in the book are ours alone. Heartfelt thanks go to Yehuda Bauer, Menachem Brinker, Rachel Elijor, Yosef Kaplan, Deborah Owen, Adina Stern, and an anonymous reader for Yale University Press.

Other intellectual debts, usually in the form of unforgettable exchanges or lectures heard over the years, are gratefully acknowledged. Some of the following persons may not know that they inspired this book, but inspire they did: Shlomo Avineri, Haim Be'er, Susannah Heschel, Ora Limor, Anita Shapira, Daniel Statman, Yedidia Stern, Michael Walzer, and A. B. Yehoshua. Several volume editors in the Posen Library sent us relevant materials, and we are grateful again to Ora Limor and Yosef Kaplan, alongside David Roskies and Elishava Carlebach.

Most of this book was written during Fania Oz-Salzberger's double tenure at the University of Haifa and at Monash University's Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation, as the Leon Liberman Chair in Modern Israel Studies. Warm thanks go to Australian friends Lee Liberman, Les Reti, and Ricci Swart. It is likewise a pleasure to thank the Fellows, staff, and students of the University Center for Human Values, Princeton University, for a zesty year of intellectual adventure in 2009–10.

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this book their subtle and perceptive editorial attention, for which we are particularly thankful. Joyce Rappaport and Yael Nakhon-Harel of the Posen Foundation kindly provided further editorial support. Tammy Reznik held the fort at Monash University. At the University of Haifa, Ela Bauer, Lee Maanit, Boaz Gur, and Alon Kol were of great help during various stages of research and writing; Kalanit Kleemer's administrative support was invaluable.

Books consulted during the process of writing appear in our sources lists, which also provides all references to our quotations. However, a handful of Internet sites deserve special mention. [Mechon-mamre.org](http://Mechon-mamre.org) provided us with a useful bilingual Bible. Some of the English renderings from the Babylonian Talmud originate from the Soncino edition translated by L. Miller and edited by Rabbi Dr. Isidore Epstein, available online at [www.come-and-hear.com/talmud/](http://www.come-and-hear.com/talmud/), often touched up by us, while some other Talmudic quotations are newly translated by the present authors. We benefited from the excellent *ma'agar sifrut ha-kodesh*, the online scriptures search engine at the Hebrew University's *Snunit* website, [kodesh.snunit.k12.il](http://kodesh.snunit.k12.il). Of similar value is the website of the Center for Educational Technology (CET) at [cet.org.il](http://cet.org.il), sponsored by the Rothschild Foundation. Helpful too is the Ben-Yehuda Project at [benyehuda.org](http://benyehuda.org), a volunteer-run e-book collection of public domain Hebrew literature. The Web, as the historian among us keeps trying to persuade the novelist among us, is a labyrinthine library of letters, a mammoth maze of meanings, and thus a very Talmudic space.

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While reiterating our sole responsibility for all errors remaining in this book, we are hoping they might be of the sort that invites dispute rather than derision. After benefiting from so many interlocutors, we look forward to new conversations, especially of the critical kind.

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ONE  
Continuity

*In two and thirty most occult and wonderful paths of wisdom did the Lord of Hosts engrave his name: God of the armies of Israel, ever-living God, merciful and gracious, sublime, dwelling on high, who inhabiteth eternity. He created this universe by the three Sepharim—Number, Writing, and Speech. Ten are the numbers, as are the Sephiroth, and twenty-two the letters, these are the Foundation of all things.*

JEWISH CONTINUITY HAS always hinged on uttered and written words, on an expanding maze of interpretations, debates, and disagreements, and on a unique human rapport. In synagogue, at school, and most of all in the home, it has always involved two or three generations deep in conversation.

Ours is not a bloodline but a textline. There is a tangible sense in which Abraham and Sarah, Rabban Yohanan, Glikl of Hameln, and the present authors all belong to the same family

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tree. Such continuity has recently been disputed: there was no such thing as a “Jewish nation,” we are told, before modern ideologues deviously dreamed it up. Well, we disagree. Not because we are nationalists. One purpose of this book is to reclaim our ancestry, but another is to explain what kind of ancestry, in our view, is worth the effort of reclaiming.

We are not about stones, clans, or chromosomes. You don’t have to be an archeologist, an anthropologist, or a geneticist to trace and substantiate the Jewish continuum. You don’t have to be an observant Jew. You don’t have to be a Jew. Or, for that matter, an anti-Semite. All you have to be is a reader.

In his wonderful poem “The Jews,” the late Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai wrote:

The Jews are not a historical people  
And not even an archeological people, the Jews  
Are a geological people with rifts  
And collapses and strata and blazing lava.  
Their annals must be measured  
On the scale of a different measurement.

A geological people: this unique metaphor may speak a deep truth about other nations, too. It need not be only about the Jews. But it resonates very powerfully for us when we reflect on Jewish continuity as primarily textual. The “historical,” ethnic, genetic Jewish nationhood is a tale of rift and calamity. It is a landscape of geological disaster. Can we claim a biological pedigree dating, say, to Roman-era Galilean Jews? We doubt it. So much blood of both converts and enemies, of emblematic Khazars and Cossacks, might be flowing in our veins. On the other hand, geneticists today seem to tell us that some of our genes have been on the ride with us for a while.

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This is interesting. But totally beside our point.

There is a lineage. Our annals *can* be gauged, our history told. But our “scale of a different measurement” is made of words. That is what this book is about.

At this early stage we need to say loud and clear what kind of Jews we are. Both of us are secular Jewish Israelis. This self-definition carries several significances. First, we do not believe in God. Second, Hebrew is our mother tongue. Third, our Jewish identity is not faith-powered. We have been reading Hebrew and non-Hebrew Jewish texts all our lives; they are our cultural and intellectual gateways to the world. Yet there is not a religious bone in our bodies. Fourth, we now live in a cultural climate—in the modern and secular part of Israeli society—that increasingly identifies Bible quoting, Talmudic reference, and even a mere interest in the Jewish past, as a politically colored inclination, at best atavistic, at worst nationalist and triumphalist. This current liberal withdrawal from most things Jewish has many reasons, some of them understandable; but it is misguided.

What does secularism mean to Israeli Jews? Evidently more than it means to other modern nonbelievers. From nineteenth-century Haskalah thinkers to latter-day Hebrew authors, Jewish secularity has furnished an ever-growing bookshelf and an ever-expanding space for creative thought. Here is just one nutshell, from an essay titled “The Courage to Be Secular” by Yizhar Smilansky, the great Israeli writer who signed his books with the pseudonym Samech Yizhar:

Secularism is not permissiveness, nor is it lawless chaos. It does not reject tradition, and it does not turn

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its back on culture, its impact and its successes. Such accusations are little more than cheap demagoguery. Secularism is a different understanding of man and the world, a non-religious understanding. Man may very well feel the need, from time to time, to search for God. The nature of that search is unimportant. There are no ready-made answers, or ready-made indulgences, pre-packaged and ready to use. And the answers themselves are traps: give up your freedom in order to gain tranquility. God's name is tranquility. But the tranquility will dissipate and freedom will be wasted. What then?

Self-conscious seculars seek not tranquility but intellectual restlessness, and love questions better than answers. To secular Jews like ourselves, the Hebrew Bible is a magnificent human creation. Solely human. We love it and we question it.

Some modern archeologists tell us that the scriptural Israelite kingdom was an insignificant dwarf in terms of material culture. For example, the biblical portrayal of Solomon's great edifices is a later political fabrication. Other scholars cast doubt on all manner of continuity between ancient Hebrews and present-day Jews. Perhaps this is what Amichai meant when he said we are "not even an archaeological people." But each of these scholarly approaches, whether factually right or wrong, is simply irrelevant for readers like us. Our kind of Bible requires neither divine origin nor material proof, and our claim to it has nothing to do with our chromosomes.

The *Tanach*, the Bible in its original Hebrew, is breathtaking.

Do we "understand" it to the last syllable? Obviously not.

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Even proficient speakers of Modern Hebrew probably misconstrue the original meanings of many biblical words, because their role in our vocabulary differs significantly from what they stood for in Ancient Hebrew. Take this exquisite image from Psalms 104:17, “Wherein the birds make their nests, *hassida broshim beiyta*.” To a present-day Israeli ear, these three words mean “the stork makes its home in the cypress trees.” Makes you reflect, by the way, on the winsome frugality of Ancient Hebrew, which can often pull off a three-word phrase that requires three times that number in English translation. And how colorful and flavorful is each of the three words, all nouns, brimming with meaning! Anyway, back to our main point. You see, in Israel today storks don’t make their homes on cypresses. Storks very rarely nest here anyhow, and when they settle down in their thousands for a night’s rest en route to Europe or to Africa, those needle-shaped cypresses are not their obvious choice.

So we must be getting it wrong; either the *hassida* is not a stork, or the *brosh* is not a cypress. Never mind. The phrase is lovely, and we know it is about a tree and a bird, part of a great praise for God’s creation, or—if you prefer—for the beauty of nature. Psalm 104 gives its Hebrew reader the broad imagery, the dense and fine-tuned delight that might be compared to the magic of a Walt Whitman poem. We don’t know whether it does the same in translation.

The Bible is thus outliving its status as a holy writ. Its splendor as literature transcends both scientific dissection and devotional reading. It moves and excites in ways comparable to the great literary oeuvres, sometimes Homer, sometimes Shakespeare, sometimes Dostoevsky. But its historical

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leverage is different from that of these opuses. Granted that other great poems may have inaugurated religions, no other work of literature so effectively carved a legal codex, so convincingly laid out a social ethic.

It is also, of course, a book that gave birth to innumerable other books. As though the Bible itself harked and heeded the command it attributes to God, “go forth and multiply.” So even if the scientists and critics are right, and ancient Israel erected no palaces and witnessed no miracles, its literary output is both palatial and miraculous. We mean this in a wholly secular sense.

But let us check and balance. We have many loving things to say about Jewish specificities, but this book is emphatically not intended to be a celebration of separatism or superiority. Jewish culture was never impenetrable to non-Jewish inspiration. Even when it snubbed foreign trends, it often quietly endorsed them. To us, Tolstoy is as giant a pillar as Agnon, and Bashevis Singer does not trump Thomas Mann. There is much that we cherish in “gentile” literature and quite a bit that we dislike in Jewish traditions. Many of the scriptures, including the Bible at its most eloquent, flaunt opinions we cannot fathom and set rules we cannot obey. All our books are fallible.

The Jewish model of intergenerational conversation merits close attention.

Ancient Hebrew texts are continually engaged with two crucial pairings: parent and child, teacher and pupil. These pairs are arguably more important, even more important, than woman and man. The word *dor*, generation, appears dozens of times in both Bible and Talmud. Both opuses love recounting

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chains of generations, harking from the distant past and pointing to the distant future. A great deal is said about the chain's most basic link, the Father and the Son. (Please be patient about mothers and about daughters; they too inhabit this book.) From Adam and Noah to the destruction of the Judean and Israelite kingdoms, the Bible zooms in and out on particular fathers and sons, most of whom belong to meticulously listed genealogies.

This is by no means unique. Many cultures, probably all cultures, possess patrifilial paradigms at the roots of their collective memory, mythology, ethos, and art. There is a universal context to the numerous biblical dramas of fathers and sons. These are the perennial tales of love and hate, loyalty and betrayal, resemblance and dissimilarity, inheritance and disinheritance. Almost all societies have cherished the imperative of intergenerational storytelling. Almost all cultures have gloried the passing of the torch from old to young. It has always been a primary duty of human memory—familial, tribal, and later national.

But there is a Jewish twist to this universal imperative. “No ancient civilization,” Mordecai Kaplan writes, “can offer a parallel comparable in intensity with Judaism’s insistence upon teaching the young and inculcating in them the traditions and customs of their people.” Is such a generalization fair to other ancient civilizations? We do not pretend to know or judge. But we do know that Jewish boys, by no means only the rich and privileged ones, were put in touch with the written word at a staggeringly young age.

Here is one astounding constant of Jewish history since (at least) Mishnaic times: every boy was expected to go to school from the age of three to the age of thirteen. This duty



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