

Review

JewsandWords

Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014. 248pp.

Leonard J. Greenspoon^{*}

Can you tell much about a book from its cover? The design of the cover to this volume would lead any attentive reader to an affirmative response.

Look at the title, *JewsandWords*. These letters, without any space separating them into words, recall ancient manuscripts, where the niceties of word division were often sacrificed to allow more writing per (expensive) page. Admittedly, ancient Hebrew manuscripts also dismissed with written vowels, but there's only so much we modern readers can do without. And then there's "Jews," not "Judaism." For the authors, Jews, flesh-and-blood people, preceded Judaism as a concept and remain the appropriate focus to this day.

Both of the authors of this volume—the well-known novelist Amos Oz and his more academically oriented daughter, Fania Oz-Salzberger—chose careers in which words and their transmission play substantive roles. At the same time, we can't help but notice that, as volumes go (especially those authored by Jews?), this is a relatively slim offering (at 204 pages of text). Jews are talkative, the authors observe, a trait that can be transmitted textually as well as orally. Here, however, they appear to be offering an implicit challenge to any sort of calculation that equates quantity and quality.

Finally, there is something we don't see on the cover, that is, the name of a translator. Amos Oz's works are justifiably famous in the English-speaking world, but only by dint of expert translation from his (and his daughter's) native Hebrew. Here they write, in an unmediated fashion, elegant and accessible English. Rather than seeing this

^{*} Leonard J. Greenspoon holds the Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization at Creighton University, where he also is a professor of classical and near eastern studies and of theology.

as some kind of intentional linguistic tour de force, we should acknowledge, as do the Oz's, that English, along with Hebrew, is the language of self-expression among Jews today.

Chapter 1, "Continuity," presents an aptly titled essay highlighting the bonds that have united Jews of different generations, historical epochs, and cultural contexts. They are held together by the transmission of traditions, "from fathers to sons," traditions that earlier communities had committed to written texts. These texts and tales are populated with a vast array of characters, a few of whom took starring roles, many of whom lacked even a line of oral expression. Almost to a person, they are alive with vitality, a desire to learn, and a need to teach. For the Oz's, these characters are authentic Jews, whether or not they actually lived. And they are authentic Jews—in common with the secularist Oz's—no matter how they feel about God (or, god).

Even if theirs is not a traditional account of Jews, the Oz's recognize that their first chapter is devoted overwhelmingly, and unfairly, to males. They seek to redress this historical and ideological slight in chapter 2, "Vocal Women." As they demonstrate, there are a lot more women, a lot more assertive women, than we might think. And they must be included among the "Jews" whose "words" matter.

Chapter 3, "Time and Timelessness," highlights the inability of linear time to provide an adequate account of Jews, who are nonetheless necessarily placed within the confines of a history that moves forward. But time can also be viewed as circular or as engaged in continuous self-referential conversation: occurrences after an event can be judged crucial for a correct understanding or appreciation of a moment that is otherwise fixed in chronology. No more than any other people, Jews could not escape temporal limitations. But they could be of the present, the past, and the future in a chronologically ambiguous, but also deeply enriching mode of experiencing life—which all too often entailed overcoming trials and travails.

It is in chapter 4, with the extended title "Each Person Has a Name; or, Do Jews Need Judaism?" that the Oz's argue for the priority and primacy of Jews over Judaism. As they correctly observe, there were "Jews" considerably before there was "Judaism." The terminology of religion is, in their view, far too limited, far too limiting, to encompass the richness of Jews (real or fictional) and their almost boundless energy and ability—and need—to communicate with each other, younger individuals, and older (often much older) generations.

The “epilogue” builds on and expands the notions set out in the earlier chapters. In particular, the Oz’s argue against a particularistic, isolating, or inner-turning form of Jews (or Judaism) that fails to interact positively and creatively with other people and other cultures. We have much to teach others; at least as much, if not more, to learn from them.

This is a wonderful book, a pleasure to read, an even greater pleasure to write about or discuss in conversation. Allowances need to be made for the Israel-centric viewpoints of the authors—after all, they are Israelis—and for their secular perspective. By allowances, I simply mean that the Oz’s are who and what they are, and are not about to pretend otherwise. Nor would they expect you or me to behave in any way at variance with our essences.

That said, I do have two concerns. With some frequency, they speak of “the writer” or “the historian” as a significant way of identifying and distinguishing father from daughter. But I don’t feel that, as practiced by these two individuals at least, these are all that different professions in terms of self-expression or self-identification. They are both gifted storytellers and razor-sharp analysts of the human condition. And I think that would be equally true if one of them were a medical doctor and the other a lawyer.

But since they do present some of their thinking as rooted in history, I wish they had rooted their argumentation more deeply in the work of historians. This is especially true in their last chapter, where they are undoubtedly correct that “Jews” preceded “Judaism,” but fail to interact with a considerable body of recent work about the ambiguity of terms such as ‘oi Ioudaioi’ or the reciprocal role of ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity’ in forming distinct communities over the first three or four centuries CE.

So, we can quibble, as can anyone—Jew or non-Jew. But the feeling of genuine gratitude to the Oz’s for sharing this with us should in no way be diminished. This relatively short volume is an unalloyed joy to read, to consider, and to pass on.