

FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION
THE TEXTLINE

AMOS OZ and **FANIA OZ-SALZBERGER** talk to **HELGA ABRAHAM** about their love of words and how they together created a new theory of the Jewish people

Amos Oz was born in Jerusalem, ran away to a kibbutz at the age of 14, and lives today in the Negev town of Arad. His daughter Fania Oz-Salzberger lives in Haifa, where she is a professor of history at Haifa University. We meet in Oz's apartment in north Tel Aviv, which, like his house in Arad, is lined with books.

While both father and daughter exude the same warmth, charm and simplicity, their different temperaments become quickly apparent: the father is the poetic writer, the daughter the analytical intellect; he is quiet and reserved, she bubbly and outgoing, and as much as the novelist is eloquent, the historian is articulate. As they sit side by side – bantering, joking, concurring, arguing and sometimes correcting each other – they epitomize, for me, two generations of ‘thinking’ and involved Israeli sabras.

When novelist Amos Oz was a small child, his ambition was to become, not a writer, but a book. This was not simply due to his love of books. “It was from fear,” he says. “When I was a little boy in Jerusalem, we lived in the shadow both of the Holocaust and of an impending second Holocaust for there was great fear that when the British pulled out of Palestine, millions of Arabs would come and strangle us. I realised then that not every boy grows up to be a man but if I became a book

I would survive in some faraway library.”

Pertinently Oz, Israel’s elder man of letters and serial prizewinner, has now co-authored together with his daughter, historian Fania Oz-Salzberger, a book, *Jews and Words*, which is an elegy to the quintessential surviving book – the Bible – to the literary corpus it engendered, to its eloquent language and accompanying tradition of interpreting, reinterpreting, arguing and talking. Taking this one step further, the father-daughter team put forward the somewhat revolutionary thesis that it is words and the transmission of an ancient literary tradition which has kept the Jews together, in a textline rather than bloodline.

Although the authors wrote their new book in English – both possess perfect command of the English language – they say that they were not aiming specifically at a Diaspora public. “We did not write the book for Jews or non-Jews, the Diaspora or Israel,” says Oz, “We wrote it for lovers of books and lovers of words.” *Jews and Words* has already sold out in the US and is due to come out shortly in Hebrew, German, French, Dutch and Italian, possibly even Chinese.

Oz’s love of books began before he could even read, with the bedtime stories his parents read to him and their love of words: “They would point out the similarity

Photo: Helga Abraham



From *Jews and Words*

"If there is any chain at all between us and Abraham it is made of written words."

"An informed progeny is the key to collective survival."

"The Hebrew Bible is a magnificent human creation. We love it and we question it."

"No other work of literature so effectively carved a legal codex, so convincingly laid out a social ethic."

"The Bible for us is a tricky cocktail of fact, myth and the sort of fiction that can convey deep truths."

"Genesis, Isaiah and Proverbs are our pyramids, our Chinese wall, our Gothic cathedrals. They stand undemolished in the flow of time."

To this Oz quips: "They call us cut flowers and I call them dried flowers." Fania: "They say that we do not understand the Bible and are not entitled to read it selectively."

On this point father and daughter are equally passionate and proudly remark – in a nudge to the American rabbi – that, despite five generations of secularism in their family, they have maintained a rich Jewish library and love of its moral legacy. While theirs has been an unbroken chain of continuity, they are in many ways reflecting, with their new book, the greater phenomenon of secular Israelis returning to ancient sources. As they note in the book, "there are today more Bible-wise atheists in Israel than anywhere else." The historian points out that secular Israelis "are not only returning to the Bible with a vengeance, they are studying the Talmud, and rock groups in Tel Aviv are setting medieval Sephardi poets to music. It is a veritable renaissance of words!"

As to the age-old question of what defines Jewish identity, Oz does not dispute the role of faith. "We do not claim that religion is irrelevant, Heaven forbid," he says. "We are simply saying that it is not exclusive and is not the only way to be Jewish." And while, for him and his daughter, the Hebrew language and the fact of living in Israel are crucial components of their Jewish identity, it is the tradition of the Jewish texts and scholarship which they say constitutes the central link to their Jewish heritage. And Amos Oz goes even further, stating adamantly: "if Jews lose their rapport with the texts, they will eventually be cut off from Jewish continuity."

Jews and Words, Yale University Press, 2012, hb, 160pp, £18.99

between two different words or how the tiniest twist could make a word change its meaning completely. So I became infatuated, not just with stories, but with the words themselves." To date, Oz's prolific literary output spans 19 novels, 8 works of non-fiction and countless essays and articles. A supreme intellectual, propelled by curiosity, he owns a personal library of 8,000 books.

In the Oz family – as in the bigger tribal family – love of words has been a central motif running from generation to generation. Oz's grandfather, Alexander Klausner, wrote Zionist poetry, his great uncle Joseph Klausner was a renowned scholar who owned a collection of 20,000 books, his father was a librarian and book collector, his mother a storyteller, his daughter Fania has written two works of non-fiction, *Translating the Enlightenment and Israelis in Berlin*, his youngest daughter Galia is a successful writer of children's books, and his son Daniel is about to publish his second volume of poetry in Hebrew.

Fania recalls that her first toys were books and her earliest memories were in words. "When you are very young," she says, "there is a sensuality carved onto texts and letters that remains with you all your life". Today she finds a similar sensuality in the Kindle and the iPad: "I love the touch of

light: "We were very good friends before and we are even better friends now," says Oz. "It's good family therapy to write a book together," says Fania.

Both father and daughter are avowed secularists. In *Jews and Words* they define themselves as the "Atheists of the Book", but the fact of being secular, they say, does not mean abandoning the ancient Jewish texts. "As a secular Jew, I feel a legitimate heir to the Jewish library," says Oz. Not only an heir but a huge fan, for this supremely unreligious writer describes the Bible as "the greatest book I have ever read" and, in *Jews and Words*, accords it boundless superlatives such as "breathtaking", "magnificent", "palatial".

"The Bible is in my veins," says Oz, "I know sections by heart from my childhood and I read a chapter every morning of my life . . . over and over again." Oz finds inspiration for his own writing in the "poetic and algebraic quality of biblical narration", and although he admires the beauty of the King James translation, he says it does not always reflect the original Hebrew. "Take the fifth commandment. The Hebrew says 'lo tirtzach/do not murder'; the English says 'do not kill'. There is not the slightest etymological proximity between 'murder' and 'kill'; they are two different concepts entirely."

The historian adds: "This is a mis-translation with a deep moral meaning, which we think is a Christian input, for it can be interpreted as saying that all killing is bad, even in self-defence."

If the authors have an axe to grind, it is within the Jewish world itself and within the ever-intensifying Orthodox vs. secular debate. Indeed, their book can be seen as entering into the fray with gusto on behalf of the secular side. "Our book is political in the sense that we are reclaiming our ancestry and our legacy from the smug sort of Jewish Orthodoxy," says Fania. As to why this should be necessary, Oz explains: "In the most horrible Jewish tradition, some Orthodox tried to inflict guilt on the secular with accusations such as 'your Judaism is not Judaism' and 'ours is the only genuine Judaism', so now we are saying that this heritage belongs also to us, and perhaps even more so because we have a broader perspective."

Apparently the right of secular Jewry to comment on biblical texts is not a given. Fania recounts how, in a recent review of *Jews and Words*, a prominent American rabbi stated that the authors could not do as they pleased with the Bible and the Talmud and that secular Jews, anyway, are unable to maintain the Jewish tradition because they are like cut flowers in a vase.

Fania Oz-Salzberger will be discussing *Jews and Words* at **JEWISH BOOK WEEK** on Tuesday 26 February at 8.30pm

these sleek, metallic, super-lightweight books . . . even the little click of turning the pages electronically is sensual." Her father demurs: "I like the object, I like to hold it and write little notes in the margin." While the historian contributed the cutting-edge analogies that pepper the book (eg "tablet to tablet, scroll to scroll") and likes to describe the internet as "a wonderful maze of meaning in a very talmudic space," the novelist is less enthusiastic: "I think the internet is an addiction and I try to avoid addictions in my life."

When asked how the two worked together on the book, Oz answers, "I can answer in two words; we talked." The transition from talking to writing may have been "smooth and joyful" but there were, admits Fania, quite a few disagreements along the way. "I am a historian and I am strict about fact-finding and less patient with generalizations. My co-author, in contrast, loves generalizations. So I made sure that we backed what we said with facts and sources as much as possible and I brought in most of the footnotes." Disagreements aside, both of them view the joint venture in a positive