

Va'eira 5779

A Modern Prophet

Rabbi Lea Mühlstein
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In memory of Amos Oz

"Fair-eyed as David, rebellious as Absalom, eloquent as Solomon, preaching peace like Jeremiah, and braving tragedy like Job."

These are the words that Jerusalem Post journalist Amotz Asa-El chose to describe Amos Oz, who died last Friday. Oz, who is rightly described as the most successful Israeli novelist besides Shay Agnon, was unique in his ability to eloquently capture the complexities of the inheritance that we are reminded of in this week's Torah portion (Exo. 6:8): "the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, I will give it to you for a possession." His writing and his own life story are so intertwined with this promise, that it seems appropriate to use the opportunity of today's sermon to reflect on his life and work.

Amos Oz truly inherited the land of Israel as a possession: born Amos Klausner in Jerusalem in Mandatory Palestine in 1939, there never was another place than Israel, which he could call home. He recalled that on the night the United Nations voted to establish the State of Israel on part of British Mandate Palestine, his father crawled into bed with his eight-year-old son, whispering: "From now on, from the moment we have our own state, you will never be bullied just because you are a Jew. Not that. Never again. From tonight that's finished. For ever." It was the only time Oz ever saw his father cry.

His childhood was deeply flawed, growing up during the siege on Jerusalem in the War of Independence, sleeping on a mattress in the corner with his parents while the food was rationed, the windows were sandbagged, the medical supplies ran down to nothing, and the toilets overflowed because there was no water to flush them. "Every few minutes, when a shell landed, the whole hill shook, and the stone-built houses shuddered," he remembered. His relationship with his parents was anything but easy: his mother broke under the weight of history as the Nazis killed her brother, her sister-in-law and her nephew. They killed almost all her school friends. They killed the world she grew up in – and then Stalin swept away anything that remained. After a period of mental illness, she died of suicide when Oz was just 12 and a half years old. Two years after his mother's suicide, Amos Oz left his father and his father's world – and began his metamorphosis into a very different person.

At the age of 14, Oz wrote: "I killed my father and the whole of Jerusalem, changed my name, and went on my own to Kibbutz Hulda to live there over the ruins." He didn't literally kill his father but he ran away from Jerusalem to a kibbutz – and abandoned his father's surname, Klausner, for one of his own invention. "Oz' means strength – and it also means courage," he explained in a later interview.

"When I left home at 14 and a half, I decided to become everything [my father] was not, and not to be anything that he was. He was a right-wing intellectual; I decided to be a left-wing socialist. He was a city dweller; I decided to become a tractor driver. He was short; I decided to become very tall. It didn't work out, but I tried – I tried. So, I assumed the name 'Oz', because this courage and strength are what I needed most."

Maybe it was his adopted name that gave him the courage to embrace the role of the prophet in his writings and in his life. Despite his global literary success, Oz suffered vicious attacks for founding the left wing Peace Now organization and for his obstinate opposition to what he termed as the "occupation of the West Bank." He was regularly called a traitor.

But like the biblical prophets, Oz was not motivated by political zeal or ulterior motives but rather by a deep sense of optimism and by a "stubborn hope for peace between Israel and the Arabs, and particularly between Israel and the Palestinians." His daughter Fania Oz-Salzberger described how her father insisted "even at the end ... that men and women can become better with time, more complex and better, thanks to some touch of the proximate other, and of the pain of the far-off and foreign other, through the ability to tell each other stories and to hear stories and to live for a brief moment in the foreign skin of the heroes of the stories."

The beauty of Oz's writing lies in his ability to tell stories. Stories that the world and often even Israelis didn't know. As he once put it: "Israel of the coastal plain, where eight out of ten Israeli Jews live far removed from the occupied territories, from the fiery Jerusalem, from the religious and nationalistic conflicts, is unknown to the outside world, almost unknown to itself."

These hidden stories were some of the stories he most wanted to tell. Many of his stories captured in 33 books are deeply personal, rooted in the normal complexity of the human experience. Oz compared living in Israel to living life on the slope of an active volcano, observing that "Near a volcano one still falls in love, one still gets jealous, one still wants a promotion, one still gossips." Oz showed an Israel to the world that never normally makes it to the news headlines anywhere – an Israel of everyday people far removed from fundamentalism, fanaticism, nationalism, or militancy of any sort.

And so it is not surprising that at his memorial ceremony, the President of Israel, Reuven Rivlin, asked: "Who will continue to tell our story?"

Noting that her father died on Friday, Fania Oz-Salzberger began her eulogy: "Truly righteous people die on Shabbat. Now I understand that writers should die on Friday. The word got out just before this wintry Shabbat, and throughout this long weekend, in Israel and abroad, tens of thousands of people read about father and words by father. A writer should die on Friday."

Maybe the truth is that writers never truly die, for their works remain with us. As Fania reminded us at the end of her tribute: "We have words and they have much power, and their power is not going to die. Father left us them and there are others, and there will be ten thousand more. Words change a view, words change the world. They do not die."

We often conclude our service with the words: may God give strength to the people, may God bless the people with peace – Adonai Oz l'amo yiten, Adonai yevarech et amo va'shalom. In celebration of Amos Oz' life, let us reflect on these words by translating them slightly differently: God gave [Amos] Oz to our people so that we may receive the blessing of peace.

And so, when we return to the wonderful stories and the words of hope and optimism of Amos Oz, let us embrace the legacy of the living to ensure that the hope encapsulated in those words will come true one day, that men and women will become better with time; for that will bring the blessing of peace and that is most certainly God's will.