

# AMOS OZ

FROM SOCIALISM AND KIBBUTZ  
TO LITERARY LEGEND



The Author Amos Oz dies at the end of 2018. He left behind a series of manuscripts that are a source of inspiration not only to us, but hopefully to the generations to come; His life story and writings takes us to a journey through the history of Zionism and the state of Israel.

This booklet is an invitation to be exposed to the history of the Israeli literature through Oz's biography, to read about its streams and to learn about the values behind it. This booklet does not try to depict every event in Oz's life, but rather to shine on specific important junctons that allows us to reflect on the Zionist notions they encompass; and through them to learn about our lives today.

In this booklet you'll find Oz's biography, the story of his life in the Kibbutz and to learn how the socialist notions affected his writing. Moreover, you'll learn about Oz's vision for the state of Israel in the past years before he passed away and how Israel's recent policies regarding various issues raised concerns for his perception of Zionism.

This booklet is an invitation to discuss values, Zionist perception, the vision for Israel in the 21st century and tradition. Whether one is fond of Oz's writings and subscribes to his notions of Zionism is relevant. This booklet is a tool to help expose the complicities, the dilemmas and criticism the author left us in his manuscripts- these writings will forever be a part of the Jewish Zionist canon.

We hope you'll enjoy this journey and that you'll be able to implement the notions behind this booklet into the movement day to day practice.

Amos Oz (formerly, Klausner) 4 May 1939 (15 Iyyar 5699) – 28 December 2018 (20 Tevet 5779).

Oz was an Israeli author, intellectual, Professor Emeritus of Literature at Ben Gurion University in the Negev.

### **Among the awards he received are:**

- Brenner Prize
- Bernstein Prize
- Goethe Prize
- Bialik Prize
- Israel Prize
- Germany Writers' Union Peace Prize
- Neuman Prize
- Kafka Prize
- Tolstoy Prize

### **Literary influences**

- Sherwood Anderson
- Fyodor Dostoevsky
- Gabriel Garcia Marquez
- Shai Agnon

Born as Amos Klausner into a well-known Jerusalemite Revisionist family, his father, Yehuda Arieh Klausner, held a Ph.D. in Hebrew literature and worked in the Jewish National & University Library. His mother Fania née Mussman studied philosophy and history at Prague University, continuing later at Hebrew University.

His paternal family members were intellectuals, fierce supporters of the Herut party. His maternal grandfather was the owner of the flour mill in the city of Rivne, currently in Ukraine.

Oz's mother committed suicide when he was 12 years old.

Oz grew up in the Kerem Avraham neighborhood of Jerusalem. In Grade 2 he studied with his neighbor, the famed poet Zelda Schneerson. Although his family was not at all religious, his father even holding negative views about all matters to do with religion, Oz studied in the religious school.

At 14.5, he left home and joined Kibbutz Hulda. His compulsory military service was in IDF Battalion 50, at the time part of the Paratroopers Brigade. He later studied literature and philosophy at Hebrew University. Oz married Nili, a Kibbutz Hulda member and daughter of the kibbutz librarian. They have three children together. Their daughters, the historian Professor Fania Oz-Salzberger, and her sister Galia Oz, are also involved in literary writing. Their son Daniel is a poet and musician. Several years after Daniel's birth, Oz moved the family to the dry climes of Arad as a way of easing his son's severe asthma. In his final years, Oz lived in Tel Aviv.

Amos Oz passed away in 2018 after losing his battle with cancer. He was 79.

*In Amos Oz's short biography there was information regarding his parents and children*

- *Is this information important? Why?*
- *What does the information about his parents tells us about Amos Oz?*
- *What does the information about his children tells us about Amos Oz?*
- *What does your family history tells about you?*
- *What would you want your family history tells about you and your descendants?*
- *Can we ask the same questions regarding a movement's history?*



- Where the Jackals Howl.** Short stories. 1965  
**Elsewhere.** Novel. 1966  
**My Michael.** Novel set in Jerusalem. 1967  
**Unto Death.** Two novellas. 1971  
**Touch the Water, Touch the Wind.** Novel. 1973  
**Others.** Anthology of stories. 1974  
**The Hill of Evil Counsel.** Three novellas. 1976  
**Soumchi.** Children's book. 1978. Reprinted 2015, illustrated by Ruth Gvilli  
**A Perfect Peace.** novel. 1982  
**Black Box.** A novel in letters. 1987  
**To Know a Woman.** Novel. 1991  
**Fima.** Novel. 1991  
**Don't Call It Night.** Novel. 1994  
**Panther in the Basement.** Novel. 1995. Reprinted 2015, illustrations by Anna Ticho  
**The Same Sea.** Novel in the form of poems. 1999  
**The Silence.** Initially appeared as a story in "Where the Jackals Howl" but was published as a separate book in 2000  
**A Story of Love and Darkness.** Autobiographic novel. 2002  
**Suddenly in the Depth of the Forest.** Fable. 2005  
**Rhyming Life and Death.** Novel. 2007  
**Scenes from Village Life.** Novel comprised of stories. 2009  
**Between Friends.** Stories. 2012  
**Judas.** Novel. 2014

### Non-fiction

- In the Strong Blue Light.** Articles. 1979  
**In the The Land of Israel.** impressions from a personal trip throughout the country. 1983  
**The Slopes of Lebanon.** Articles. 1987  
**Silence of the Heavens: Agnon ponders God.** Essays. 1996  
**Starting the Story.** Essays. 1996  
**All the Hopes: Thoughts on Israeli Identity.** Essays. 1998  
**Actually There Are Two Wars Here.** Articles. 2002  
**On the Slopes of the Volcano.** Three Essays. 2006  
**Jews and Words.** In collaboration with Fania Oz-Salzberger. 2014  
**Dear Zealots: Letters from a Divided Land.** 2017  
**What's in an Apple: Conversations with Shira Hadad.** 2018

Amos Oz is Israel's most translated author, his works appearing in 45 languages including English, French, German, Arabic, Finnish, Azerbaijani, Chinese, and Polish.

As a child Oz was sent by his father to the local religious school in preference to the only alternative, the education system for Labor party members' children with its distinctly socialist thrust and in direct opposition to all that his father's beliefs as far as politics and values. Later, Oz continued on to high school at the Rehavia Gymnasia in Jerusalem.

At 14.5 years old, Oz decided to leave home, heading for Kibbutz Hulda, where the Hulda family fostered him. He lived the full kibbutz life between 1954 to 1985.

His activities and views on the kibbutz show up in his work with a somewhat critical tone.

The first book Oz published, in 1965, was "Where the Jackals Howl." It immediately caught the attention of reviewers. The descriptive technique Oz employed was very different from the norm of realism which he chose for later works.

In "Where the Jackals Howl" Oz attempts to speak of the new reality in the kibbutz, one of a collapse of the values prevalent during the Palmach generation.

Literature of the Palmach generation or the 1960s refers to specific types of works written during a period of no more than fifteen to twenty years. Many reviewed fiction of the 1950s according to the basic premise that literature holds a social role. It should educate to national values, express Zionist goals, encourage social mutuality, and promote the erasure of negative behaviors.

"There should be no acceptance of 'negative' literature which leads to despair, passivity, judgmentalism, paralysis and death" (Riftin)

"Poets in Biblical times were prophets, and prophets in these modern times are poets" (Fanoli)

In critical articles and journals of the time, the recurring mantra was that

literature must describe the destiny of the Jewish people and deal with focal national issues such as bringing the desert to bloom, immigration to Israel, the struggle with enemy states, settling the land, pioneering, and so on.

In many cases, reviewers held fast to their opinions that literature should also spread universal ideals corresponding to the Zionist vision.

In other words, literature, according to Burla and Hazaz for example, should trumpet social and defense ideologies towards realizing clear values. These statements appeared in articles in the *Maazanim* journal, the Hebrew Writers' Union journal then as now.

In literary supplements in "Al Hamishmar," the now defunct Israeli socialist newspaper, and in the long since discontinued "Masa" and "Orlogin" journals, however, young authors and critics were given literary freedom. These journals were supported by the Mapam party (the left tending United Laborers Party) and later, after the party's split, by the short-lived "Ahdut Haavodah" party of Zionist socialist Marxist leanings.

A majority of authors of the 1940s and 1950s chose the realist technique, influenced by Russian socialist realism. Works from that movement were translated in line with the mood of the times.

These authors, among them Aharon Meged, Matti Meged, Nathan Shaham, Yigal Mossinson, Moshe Shamir and others, were influenced by youth movement culture, which recognized the role of literature in representing the great Zionist historical drama playing out at the time.

These authors drew their materials from daily life by representing a shared biography which encompassed youth movements, focal theoretical or agricultural schools, the kibbutz, Hachsharah, and the War of Independence.

Their writing style exposed behavioral norms, settlement attitudes and modes of expression among Israeli born youth and the various frame-

frameworks through which these youth operated, recognizing the wish to emphasize the idealized stereotype of the newly forming culture.

The protagonist in this literary trend is guided by moral values and ideals, expected to manifest familiar moral codes, and battle for the sake of realizing the goals in which she or he believes.

Typical milestones in these works saw a protagonist involved in school activities, the youth movement, the Haganah, kibbutz or the city of Tel Aviv. It was a path expressing the shift from uncommitted youth to responsible, active youth representing unique Israeliness and personal empowerment driven by ideology. This was a proactive protagonist, able to face the challenges, never shying away from the task at hand, and willing to sacrifice self for the sake of the collective's goals.

The central trends in Israeli fiction of the 1950s were primary influences in Amos Oz's own work.

Changing tendencies developed in the 1960s, with S. Yizhar being one of the authors whose works strongly express this style. A 1960s protagonist could also be a foreigner, alone, even desolate, concerned about her- or himself, discovering that what they thought to be meaningful is actually superfluous from their perspective. These protagonists do not speak in the 1950s ideological voice, and the positive vision is overtaken by uncertain paths and indistinct plots.

Two of the central authors of the 1960s, Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua, were pillars of that period's literature and the new literary norms.

The common denominator in most critical articles appearing in the journal "Keshet" and "Achshav" was a call to shake literature free from sermonizing. This new premise claimed that it is not literature's role to preach, educate or instruct others on matters of national or social visions of any kind.

Both the authors and the reviewers of the 1960s once again appeared uncertain about Zionist, nationalistic or socialist values. This was a gen-

eration fatigued by the paths to Zionist ideological realization, tired of logic in general, and seeking to infuse literature with an aesthetic rather than social function.

Oz's writing was composed of, and heavily burdened with, symbols. Whereas the 1960s were marked by symbolic writing which related to the political and social arenas indirectly, the 1970s show a distinct shift towards writing anchored in time and place, while integrating materials from the period's political and social reality.

The Palmach generation consolidated an awareness of themselves as the start of a new era, one marked by young pioneers who joined military units tasked with protecting Hebrew settlements. Their self-set goals were to actualize Zionism and socialism. In WWII faith grew in bringing the Zionist dream into fruition, integrated with the socialist ideal. The war years brought relative economic security and an increasingly organized view on internal security, greatly reinforcing the generation's sense of empowerment compared to the Diaspora mode of the rootless, abject Jew.

Encountering the Holocaust led to a slow erosion in the younger generation's sense of security, shaking their faith in their newfound Tzabar identity which had little connection to "old-time" Jewish identity. In turn, this undermined the sense of certainty in creating a new Israeli culture utterly removed from the exilic Jewish culture.

Ironically, the pioneering and socialism crisis began after Israel's formal establishment once state institutions were initiated. A disparity developed and widened between the values and beliefs that initially shaped the thrust of establishing a homeland, and the institutions which distanced from those values.

Waves of immigration, and the growing gap between collectivist ideology and the capitalist market resultant from practical policies, created an economic structure which continued distancing from the value-based ideal.

Over the years, participation in the overall security effort became the true gateway to national affinity, in actuality replacing the pioneering values. Various events occurring in the USSR further undermined the socialist thrust among the younger generation at both the political and literary levels.

A series of events occurring in the 1950s caused authors to reexamine their paths as Zionists and socialists. Many discovered that neither movement was holding up to the test of reality. The first to find a new tool of expression were authors raised in different social climes with different educational values.

Principles where the political regime diverged from the pioneering thrust prevalent at the time of Israel's establishment were:

- The ambition to establish peaceful neighborly relations with Arab countries
- Establishment of an egalitarian socialist economy
- A lifestyle based on the fundamental values of pioneering and volunteerism
- Establishing infrastructures to create Jewish culture that would actualize the heritage of the past

These changing approaches in literary norms also find expression in work by Amos Oz. His writing fits in with the tone of criticism on many of the phenomena noted above.

We can see in the throughout the Israeli literature a few phases with different expressions of values.

- What is the purpose of literature for you as an individual?
- In your mind what is the role of literature and what part does it play in Israel's history? Does it vary to different terms?
- The Israeli literature in each time tries to empower and/or criticizes the time in which it is written values. In your mind what values does the Israeli literature reflects on in the 50's, 60's and 70's?
- In your mind what are the values of the Zionist ideas today?



Amos Oz was among the leading leftwing intellectuals in Israel, further manifesting in the public arena where he would speak out, especially in the mid-1990s. His views received broad coverage in Israeli media. His public activities began in the early 1960s when he was active in “Min Hayesod” (From the Foundation), the social-democrat party which supported Pinhas Lavon in his struggle against Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion in the “Lavon Affair” and opposed the Ben-Gurion government’s centralization.

As early as August 1967, Oz spoke up against occupation. He was active in the Peace and Security Commission, supported the Moked Party and the Sheli Party, and was among the first spokespeople for the Peace Now movement. For many years he was identified with the Labor Party and had close ties with its leader, Shimon Peres, who often consulted Oz’s views on his, Peres’, own writing. In the 1990s Oz stopped supporting the Labor Party and shifted his full support to Meretz, a left leaning party. He was on very good terms with its leader, Shulamit Aloni. Oz appeared in propaganda broadcasts in 2003 for the Meretz Party’s bid in the 16th Knesset elections, calling on the public to vote for Meretz. As elections for the 17th Knesset neared, Oz was slotted into the party’s official list in the token 116th position. In the run for the 18th Knesset, Oz was slotted into position 115 on the New Meretz list.

Oz’s views were strongly dovish when it came to social-democratic policy in the social and economic arenas. Despite his intense opposition to the settlement movement from its outset, during his visit to Ofra he stated that he opposed their staking out that ground, but would equally oppose it being razed even if it became necessary to wait 200 years for Jewish sovereignty.

On 21 February 1988 during the first intifada, Oz together with Yehuda Amichai, A.B. Yehoshua and Amos Eylon, published a letter in the New York Times encouraging American Jewish authors to give voice to their views on Israeli settlement policy.

In his speech at the 1989 Peace Now rally, Oz called the Kach movement, its supporters, and similar groups, “*Messianic cults, inconsiderate, cruel, a gang of armed gangsters, criminals against humanity, sadists, pogrom-rouses, and murderers who came from the darkest corner of Jewish life, from the bestial dungeons, who have coordinated to impose a ritual of crazy bloodthirstiness.*”

He also said:

“*When faced with the concept of banishment and exile of Arabs, which they falsely label ‘transfer,’ [...] we need to rise up and say strongly and simply: this is an impossible idea because we won’t let you banish the Arabs even if we need to split the country and the military. Even if we need to lie down before the wheels of trucks. Even if we need to blow up bridges. There will be no enforced mass banishment, because we won’t let that happen [...] the Israeli right has to know that there are actions which, if it tries to carry out, will cause the State’s disbandment*” (Yishai Menuhin, editor, *On Democracy and Obedience*, Yesh Gvul, 1990:140).

Oz was among the first to cheer on the Oslo Accords and negotiations with the PLO in 1993. In his speeches and articles, he attacked the non-Zionist Left, describing their approach as leading them “*to the point of their self-erasure*,” and emphasized his Zionism. As the Prime Ministerial special elections of 2001 drew near, a group of peace activists, Oz among them, published a prominent announcement in the *Haaretz* newspaper disqualifying the right of return for Palestinian refugees to the land areas of the State of Israel “*because this would cause the elimination of Israel [...] a wholesale return of Palestinian refugees to Israel contradicts the principle of the Jewish people’s right to self-definition.*”

In 2002 Oz stated:

“*We need to understand that the whole time two wars are being conducted by both sides here: the Palestinian people are conducting a war in order to be a free people in its land, which is in principle a just war that any fair person should support, even if one detests the means employed to conduct that war. And then there is the second war, national, Islamic, intended to take from the Jewish people its right to*

*self-definition, a war in which Israel is absolutely right, and any fair person should absolutely support that too.”*

That same year, he further stated:

*“Our biggest problem is the absence of social solidarity. A raw and blatant egotism is developing here which shows no self-shame. Twenty years ago a girl from Beit Shean said on TV ‘I’m hungry’ and thresholds trembled. Yes, some of it was lip service, but at the least, there was lip service. Now, even if she died of hunger in a live broadcast, nothing would happen other than high ratings and copywriters using it for their own purposes. Whoever once thought, in all innocence, that the locomotive of entrepreneurs and the wealthy would draw after it a long train pulling the last carriages forward, has erred. That’s not happening. The locomotives race ahead, the last carriages stay behind, trapped on rusting rails.”*

In one of his speeches, Oz said that “*people must do for others and not look away; if they see a fire, they should try to put it out; if there’s no bucket around, they can try using a cup; if there’s no cup, then a spoon. Everyone has a spoon!*” This statement led to the “Order of the Spoon” being established in Scandinavia on one of his visits there, the group’s members wearing a small spoon. The organization’s profits provide grants to projects supporting society along the principle of “*In favor of tolerance, against fanaticism.*”

Oz was among the October 2003 Geneva Initiative formulators. In 2008 he initially supported Operation Cast Lead, but as the military operation continued, he withdrew support.

In March 2011, Oz sent Marwan Barghouti, sitting out an Israeli jail sentence for the murder of 5 Israelis and involvement in terror, the Arabic version of his book “A Tale of Love and Darkness” along with a personal dedication: “In the hope that we will soon meet in peace and freedom.” In light of criticism from right wing organizations relative to this act, Oz explained that for many Arabs, reading the book helped them see the nature of Israeli intentions, since “the novel is the deeply personal history

of my own family, but it also and primarily tells the tale of Zionism, its reasons and sources.”

In November 2015 he advised that he would no longer appear in events organized by the Foreign Ministry in Israeli diplomatic missions abroad, in protest against the government’s policies.

Source: Wikipedia [Hebrew]

*In this part we learn about Amos Oz’s involvement in Israel’s political speare, on top of his literature activity.*

- What values do Oz’s political views are based on?
- In your mind, do these values connected to the values you referred to in the section above?
- In your mind, do you think this values connected to Oz’s personal life story?

*The Author uses a quote of Oz from 2002. In this quote we differentiate between two types of struggles happening in Israel at the same time.*

- In your mind what are these two struggles.
- What is your opinion regarding this division.
- Do you think this division is possible?

*In this part the autore express criticism about Israel government's policy.*

- How can we bridge this gap between his ideology regarding defending Zionism and Israel and his harsh criticism about Israel Government's policy?
- Can one define oneself as a Zionist and criticize Israel at the same time?
- If the answer is yes- what difficulties can one face?

*“Family is not a baton race, nor is a profession a beacon.”* – **My Michael, 1968**

*“Deep in their hearts, most people need more love than they're able to find.”* – **A Perfect Peace, 1982**

*“The author is differentiated from the historian not only by the way the former relates to facts, truths, reality and certainty, but also by the way words are related to.”* – **Starting the Story, 1996**

*“Just as every child loves their mother and father, so everyone falls in love, when a bit older, with someone from another family. Someone who was completely other but suddenly, in one go, like finding a golden treasure in a cave in the Tel Arza grove, life changes for the one in love.”* **A Tale of Love and Darkness, 2002**

*“The nature of fanaticism is in the wish to cause others to change.”* **How to Heal a Fanatic. 2006**

*“Anyone with the ability to change will always be considered a traitor by those unable to make any change.”* **Judas. 2014**

*“Some think the word ‘compromise’ is a rude word. Mostly, enthused idealistic young people, who think compromise is scruffy, wimpy, shows lack of integrity, opportunist. Not in my view. To me, the word ‘compromise’ is a synonym for life.”* **What's in an Apple, 2018**

## Amos Oz - From Socialism And Kibbutz To Literary Legend

Habonim Dror. 2019

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## Sources

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