
For centuries, Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger remind us, the people of Israel have not agreed about any assertion that begins with the words "We Jews." Even the claim "We Jews are just like everyone else, only more so," they point out, has been attributed to Heinrich Heine, Sigmund Freud, and Abba Eban.

In *Jews and Words*, Oz, a novelist and professor of literature at Ben-Gurion University, and his daughter, a history professor at the University of Haifa, provide a unique -- and controversial -- answer to the question, "Who is a Jew?"

Oz and Oz-Salzberger are Israeli-born secularists. They adore the natural imagery in the Bible and admire its insights into human nature. The Talmud, however, seems to them "atavistic, legalistic or nit-picky," according women no role in dispensing wisdom, prophesying, or pulling political strings, and best left to believers and ultra-believers.

In this book the authors claim that Jewish identity is not a matter of blood lines or religion. "In a plagued modernist way," they want to tear themselves away from "the bonds of orthodoxy," stop using Judaism "as a cover-all term for everything Jewish," embrace *Yiddishkeit* (which "smells of Sabbath-cooking, yellowing books, silver-bearded rabbis, and sharp-tongued aunts"), and redefine Jewishness as individualism-in-belonging to an inter-generational, multi-generational community, with a shared history, a commitment to social justice, an appetite for consuming festive meals and a commitment to reading, reciting, parsing and probing iconic (and less well known) "texts of gloom and salvation."

*Jews and Words* is filled with stories, songs, history, heresy and humor. Virtually extinct as a native language by the 4th century CE, the authors write, Hebrew returned to life in the 1880s. The "greatest linguistic start-up in modern times," Hebrew borrowed promiscuously and gave in return to Europeans and Americans such "wonderful words" as *hallelujah* and *ganef*. Departing from the Western view of time, however, Hebrew speakers stand "with their backs to the future and their faces toward the past."

Although the term Judaism dates back to 1251 or earlier, Oz and Oz-Salzberger point out, with a more manifestly polemical purpose, it was used only by Christians, and usually denoted a denunciation of Jewish persons and ideas. Adopted by Jews, "with relish," in the 19th century, the word was understood to include "the whole mélange" -- religion, cultures, rites, and customs. These days, they imply, it has been hijacked by "an orthodoxy claiming superiority."

"Chutzpah," Oz and Oz-Salzberger indicate, originated in the Talmudic notion of "an impudent court of justice" (*beit din chatzuf*), in which two laymen mediated financial disputes, even though three had been decreed as the minimum quorum needed to make decisions. Unlike Christians and Muslims, they suggest, Jews are often irreverent toward their God. "Forty years in the desert," Golda Meir quipped, "and he finally managed to lead us to the one place in the Middle East where there is no oil." Jokes like these, Oz and Oz-Salzberger insist, do not weaken Jewish identity; "if anything, they keep atheists like us in the fold."

For secular Jews in the diaspora, the authors recognize, maintaining an ethnic identity has been (and remains) more challenging than for other immigrant groups. Those who journeyed to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to escape pogroms or in search of streets paved with gold found the "fissures of apostasy, the rupture of relocation, and the strain of industrial individualism" especially painful. Unlike other Old World natives, Oz and Oz-Salzberger write, poignantly, "Jewish émigrés who thought they were burning bridges to the *shtetl*, looked back in horror to see that the *shtetl* itself had burned down, and Father and Mother in it... Forced into facing the future, they moved on."

Surprisingly, perhaps, the authors do not address current social and cultural realities that threaten to erode or efface an identity (not based in religious belief) for Jews who do not reside in Israel. In the United States, for example, Yiddish language and culture have all but disappeared, Jews have low birth rates and high percentages of intermarriage, and in an age of iPhones, iPads, text messages, and Facebook, young Jews engage infrequently or not at all in the conversations about words, traditions and books that animate the land of Oz. Judaism, one critic claims, has become increasingly symbolic and gestural.

Oz and Oz-Salzberger seem confident that "text and individuality, humor and argument, women with tongues and children with questions,... the granite splendor of Hebrew and the coarse spice of Yiddish," will continue to provide the occasions -- and the means -- to sustain Jews as Jews. But you have to wonder why they don't worry, as Jews are wont to do, that bookish
inclinations will cease to be "modes of human existence," especially evident in Jewish homes. And that something bad for Jewish identity isn't lurking right around the corner.