A Tale of Love and Darkness

Amos Oz

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I WAS BORN and bred in a tiny, low-ceilinged ground-floor flat. My parents slept on a sofa bed that filled their room almost from wall to wall when it was opened up each evening. Early every morning they used to shut away this bed deep into itself, hide the bedclothes in the chest underneath, turn the mattress over, press it all tight shut, and conceal the whole under a light grey cover, then scatter a few embroidered oriental cushions on top, so that all evidence of their night's sleep disappeared. In this way their bedroom also served as study, library, dining room and living room.

Opposite this room was my little green room, half taken up with a big-bellied wardrobe. A narrow, low passage, dark and slightly curved, like an escape tunnel from a prison, linked the little kitchenette and toilet to these two small rooms. A faint light-bulb imprisoned in an iron cage cast a gloomy half-light on this passage even during the daytime. At the front both rooms had just a single window, guarded by metal blinds, squinting to catch a glimpse of the view to the east but seeing only a dusty cypress tree and a low wall of roughly dressed stones. Through a tiny opening high up in their back walls the kitchenette and toilet peered out into a little prison yard, surrounded by high walls and paved in concrete, where a pale geranium planted in a rusty olive can was gradually dying for want of a single ray of sunlight. On the sills of these tiny openings we always kept jars of pickled gherkins and a stubborn cactus in a cracked vase that served as a flower pot.

It was actually a basement flat, as the ground floor of the building had been hollowed out of the rocky hillside. This hill was our next-door neighbour, a heavy, introverted, silent neighbour, an old, sad hill with the regular habits of a bachelor, a drowsy, wintry hill, that never scraped the furniture or entertained guests, never made a noise or disturbed us, but through the party walls there seeped constantly towards us, like a faint yet persistent musty smell, the cold, dark silence and dampness of this melancholy neighbour of ours.

Consequently right through the summer there was always a hint of winter in our home.

Visitors would say: it's always so pleasant here in a heatwave, so cool and fresh, really chilly, but how do you manage in the winter? Don't the walls let in the damp? Don't you find it depressing?

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Books filled our home. My father could read in sixteen or seventeen languages, and could speak eleven (all with a Russian accent). My mother spoke four or five languages and read seven or eight. They conversed in Russian or Polish when they did not want me to understand. (Which was most of the time. When my mother referred to a stallion in Hebrew in my hearing my father rebuked her furiously in Russian: Shto s toboy?! Vidish malchik ryadom s nami! - What's the matter with you? You can see the boy's just there!) Out of cultural considerations they mostly read books in German or English, and they presumably dreamed in Yiddish. But the only language they taught me was Hebrew. Maybe they feared that a knowledge of languages would expose me too to the blandishments of Europe, that wonderful, murderous continent.

On my parents' scale of values, the more western something was the more cultured it was considered. For all that Tolstoy and Dostoevski were dear to their Russian souls, I suspect that Germany - despite Hitler - seemed to them more cultured than Russia or Poland, and France more so than Germany. England stood even higher on their scale than France. As for America, there they were not so sure: after all, it was a country where people shot at Indians, held up mail trains, chased gold and hunted girls.

Europe for them was a forbidden promised land, a yearned-for landscape of belfries and squares paved with ancient flagstones, of trams and bridges and church spires, remote villages, spa towns, forests and snow-covered meadows.

Words like 'cottage', 'meadow' or 'goose-girl' excited and seduced me all through my childhood. They had a sensual aroma of a genuine, cosy world, far from the dusty tin roofs, the urban wasteland of scrap iron and thistles, the parched hillsides of our Jerusalem, suffocating under the weight of white-hot summer. It was enough for me to whisper to myself 'meadow', and at once I could hear the lowing of cows with little bells tied round their necks, and the burbling of brooks. Closing my eyes I could see the barefoot goose-girl, whose sexiness brought me to tears before I knew about anything.

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With the passage of the years I became aware that Jerusalem, under British rule in the nineteen-twenties, thirties and forties, must be a fascinatingly cultured city. It had big businessmen, musicians, scholars and writers: Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, S.Y. Agnon, and a host of other eminent academics and artists. Sometimes as we walked down Ben Yehuda Street or Ben Maimon Avenue my father would whisper to me: 'Look, there is a scholar with a world-wide reputation.' I did not know what he meant. I thought that having a world-wide reputation was somehow connected with having weak legs, because the person in question was often an elderly man who felt his way with a stick and stumbled as he walked along, and wore a heavy woollen suit even in summer.

The Jerusalem my parents looked up to lay far from the area where we lived: it was in leafy Rehavia with its gardens and its strains of piano music, it was in three or four cafés with gilded chandeliers in the Jaffa Road or Ben Yehuda Street, in the halls of the YMCA or the King David Hotel, where culture-seeking Jews and Arabs mixed with cultivated Englishmen with perfect manners, where dreamy, long-necked ladies floated in evening dresses, on the arms of gentlemen in dark suits, where broad-minded Britons dined with cultured Jews or educated Arabs, where there were recitals, balls, literary evenings, thés dansants, and exquisite, artistic conversations. Or perhaps such a Jerusalem, with its chandeliers and thés dansants, only existed in the dreams of the librarians, schoolteachers, clerks and bookbinders who lived in Kerem Avraham. At any rate, it didn't exist where we were. Kerem Avraham, the area where we lived, belonged to Chekhov.

Years later, when I read Chekhov (in Hebrew translation) I was convinced he was one of us: Uncle Vanya lived right upstairs from us, Doctor Samoylenko bent over me and examined me with his broad, strong hands when I had a fever and once diphtheria, Laevsky with his perpetual migraine was my mother's second cousin, and we used to go and listen to Trigorin at Saturday matinées in the Beit Ha'am Auditorium.

We were surrounded by Russians of every sort. There were many Tolstoyans. Some of them even looked just like Tolstoy. When I came across a brown photograph of Tolstoy on the back of a book I was certain that I had seen him often in our neighbourhood, strolling along Malachi Street or down Obadiah Street, bare-headed, his white beard ruffled by the breeze, as awesome as the Patriarch Abraham, his eyes flashing, using a branch as a walking stick, a Russian shirt worn outside the baggy trousers tied round his waist with a length of string.

Our neighbourhood Tolstoyans (whom my parents referred to as 'Tolstoyshchiks') were without exception devout vegetarians, world-reformers with strong feelings for nature, seekers after the moral life, lovers of humankind, lovers of every single living creature, with a perpetual yearning for the rural life, for simple agricultural labour among fields and orchards. But they were not successful even in cultivating their own pot-plants: perhaps they killed them by over-watering, or perhaps they forgot to water them, or else it was the fault of the nasty British administration that put chlorine in our water.

Some of them were Tolstoyans who might have stepped straight out of the pages of a novel by Dostoevski: tormented, talkative, suppressing their desires, consumed by ideas. But all of them, Tolstoyans and Dostoevskians alike, in our neighbourhood of Kerem Avraham, worked for Chekhov.

The rest of the world was generally known as 'the worldatlarge', but it had other epithets too: enlightened, outside, free, hypocritical. I knew it almost exclusively from my stamp collection: Danzig, Bohemia and Moravia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Oubangui-Chari, Trinidad & Tobago, Kenya Uganda & Tanganyika. That worldatlarge was far away, attractive, marvellous, but to us it was dangerous and threatening. It didn't like the Jews because they

were clever, quick-witted, successful, but also because they were noisy and pushy. It did not like what we were doing here in the Land of Israel either, because it begrudged us even this meagre strip of marshland, boulders and desert. Out there, in the world, all the walls were covered with graffiti: 'Yids, go back to Palestine', so we came back to Palestine and now the worldatlarge shouts at us: 'Yids, get out of Palestine'.

It was not only the worldatlarge that was a long way away: even the Land of Israel was pretty far off. Somewhere, over the hills and far away, a new breed of heroic Jews was springing up, a tanned, tough, silent, practical breed of men, totally unlike the Jews of the Diaspora, totally unlike the residents of Kerem Avraham. Courageous, rugged pioneers, who had succeeded in making friends with the darkness of night, and had overstepped every limit, too, as regards relations between a boy and a girl and vice-versa. They were not ashamed of anything. Grandpa Alexander once said: 'They think in the future it's going to be so simple, a boy will be able to go up to a girl and just ask for it, or maybe the girls won't even wait to be approached, but will go and ask the boys for it, like asking for a glass of water.' Short-sighted Uncle Betsalel said with polite anger: 'Isn't this sheer Bolshevism, to trample on every secret, every mystery?! To abolish all emotions?! To turn our whole life into a glass of lukewarm water?!' Uncle Nehemia, from his corner, let fly a couple of lines of a song that sounded to me like the growling of a cornered beast: 'Oh, long is the journey and winding the road, I travel o'er mountain and plain, Oh Mamma, I seek you through heat and through snow, I miss you but you're far away!. . .' Then Aunt Zipporah said, in Russian: 'That'll do, now. Have you all gone out of your minds? The boy can hear you!' And so they all changed to Russian.

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The pioneers lived beyond our horizon, in Galilee, Sharon and the Valleys. Tough, warm-hearted, though of course silent and thoughtful, young men, and strapping, straightforward, self-disciplined young women, who seemed to know and understand everything; they knew you and your shy confusion, and yet they would treat you with affection, seriousness and respect, not like a child but like a man, albeit an undersized one.

I pictured these pioneers as strong, serious, self-contained people, capable of sitting around in a circle and singing songs of heart-rending longing, or songs of mockery, or outrageous songs of lust; or of dancing so wildly that they seemed to transcend the physical; but capable, too, of loneliness and introspection, of living outdoors, sleeping in tents, hard labour, singing 'We are always at the ready', 'Your boys brought you peace with a ploughshare, today they bring peace with a gun', 'Wherever we're sent to, we go-o-o', who could ride wild horses or wide-tracked tractors, who spoke Arabic, who knew every cave and wadi, who had a way with pistols and hand grenades, yet read poetry and philosophy: large men with enquiring minds and hidden feelings, they could converse almost in a whisper by candlelight in their tents in the small hours of the morning about the meaning of our lives and the grim choices between love and duty, between patriotism and universal justice.

Sometimes my friends and I went to the Tnuva delivery yard to watch them arriving from over the hills and far away on a lorry laden with agricultural produce, 'clad in workaday garb, shod in heavy boots', and I used to go close up to them to inhale the smell of hay, the intoxicating odours of faraway places: it's where they come from, I thought, that great things are really happening. That's where the land is being built and the world is being reformed, where a new society is being forged. They are stamping their mark on the landscape and on history, they are ploughing fields and planting vineyards, they are writing a new song, they pick up their guns, mount their horses and shoot back at the Arab marauders: they take our miserable human clay and mould it into a fighting nation.

I secretly dreamed that one day they would take me away with them. And make me into a fighting nation too. That my life too would become a new song, a life as pure and straightforward and simple as a glass of water on a hot day.

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Over the hills and far away, the city of Tel Aviv was also an exciting place from which came the newspapers, rumours of theatre, opera, ballet and cabaret, as well as modern art, party politics, echoes of stormy debates, and indistinct snatches of gossip. There were great sportsmen in Tel Aviv. And there was the sea, full of bronzed Jews who could swim. Who in Jerusalem could swim? Who had ever heard of swimming Jews? These were different genes. A mutation. 'Like the wondrous birth of a butterfly out of a worm.'

There was a special magic in the very name of Tel Aviv. As soon as I heard the word 'Telaviv' I conjured up in my mind's eye a picture of a tough guy in a dark blue singlet, bronzed and broad-shouldered, a poet-worker-revolutionary, a guy made without fear, the type they called a Hevreman, with a cap worn at a careless yet provocative angle on his curly hair, smoking Matusians, someone who was at home in the world: all day long he worked hard on the land, or with sand and mortar, in the evening he played the violin, at night he danced with girls or sang them soulful songs amid the sand dunes by the light of the full moon, and in the early hours he took a handgun or a sten out of its hiding place and stole away into the darkness to guard the houses and fields.

How far away Tel Aviv was! In the whole of my childhood years I only visited it five or six times at most: we used to go occasionally to spend the festivals with the aunts, my mother's sisters. It's not just that the light in Tel Aviv was even more different from the light in Jerusalem than it is today, even the laws of gravity were completely different. People walked differently in Tel Aviv: they leaped and floated, like Neil Armstrong on the moon.

In Jerusalem people always walked rather like mourners at a funeral, or latecomers at a concert. First they put down the tip of their shoe and tested the ground. Then, once they had lowered their foot they were in no hurry to move it: we had waited two thousand years to gain a foothold in Jerusalem, and were unwilling to give it up. If we picked up our foot someone else might come along and snatch our little strip of land. On the other hand, once you

have lifted your foot, do not be in a hurry to put it down again: who can tell what menacing nest of vipers you might step on. For thousands of years we have paid with our blood for our impetuousness, time and time again we have fallen into the hands of our enemies because we put our feet down without looking where we were putting them. That, more or less, was the way people walked in Jerusalem. But Tel Aviv - wow! The whole city was one big grasshopper. The people leaped by, so did the houses, the streets, the squares, the sea breeze, the sand, the avenues, and even the clouds in the sky.

Once we went to Tel Aviv for Passover, and next morning I got up early, while everyone was still asleep, got dressed, went out, and played on my own in a little square with a bench or two, a swing, a sandpit, and three or four young trees where the birds were already singing. A few months later, at New Year, we went back to Tel Aviv, and the square wasn't there any more. It had been moved, complete with its little trees, benches, sandpit, birds and swing, to the other end of the road. I was astonished: I couldn't understand how Ben-Gurion and the duly constituted authorities could allow such a thing. How could somebody suddenly pick up a square and move it? What next - would they move the Mount of Olives, or the Tower of David? Would they shift the Wailing Wall?

People in Jerusalem talked about Tel Aviv with envy and pride, with admiration, but almost confidentially: as though the city were some kind of crucial secret project of the Jewish people that it was best not to talk about too much - after all walls have ears, spies and enemy agents could be lurking round every corner.

Telaviv. Sea. Light. Sand, scaffolding, kiosks on the avenues, a brand-new white Hebrew city, with simple lines, growing up among the citrus groves and the dunes. Not just a place that you buy a ticket for and travel to on an Egged bus, but a different continent altogether.

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For years we had a regular arrangement for a telephonic link with the family in Tel Aviv. We used to phone them every three or four months, even though we didn't have a phone and neither did they. First of all we used to write to Auntie Hayya and Uncle Tsvi to let them know that on, say, the nineteenth of the month, which was a Wednesday, and on Wednesdays Tsvi left his work at the Health Clinic at three, so at five we would phone from our chemist's to their chemist's. The letter was sent well in advance, and then we waited for a reply. In their letter, Auntie Hayya and Uncle Tsvi assured us that Wednesday the nineteenth suited them perfectly, and they would be waiting at the chemist's a little before five, and not to worry if we didn't manage to phone on the dot of five, they wouldn't run away.

I don't remember whether we put on our best clothes for the expedition to the chemist's, for the phone call to Tel Aviv, but it wouldn't surprise me if we did. It was a solemn undertaking. As early as the Sunday before, my father would say to my mother, Fania, you haven't forgotten that this is the week that we're phoning to Tel Aviv? On Monday my mother would say, Arieh,

don't be late home the day after tomorrow, don't mess things up. And on Tuesday they would both say to me, Amos, just don't make any surprises for us, you hear, just don't be ill, you hear, don't catch cold or fall over until after tomorrow afternoon. And that evening they would say to me, Go to sleep early, so you'll be in good shape for the phonecall, we don't want you to sound as though you haven't been eating properly.

So they would build up the excitement. We lived in Amos Street, and the chemist's shop was five minutes' walk away, in Zephaniah Street, but by three o'clock my father would say to my mother:

'Don't start anything new now, so you won't be in a rush.'

'I'm perfectly OK, but what about you with your books, you might forget all about it.'

'Me? Forget? I'm looking at the clock every few minutes. And Amos will remind me.'

Here I am, just five or six years old, and already I have to assume a historic responsibility. I didn't have a watch - how could I? - and so every few moments I ran to the kitchen to see what the clock said, and then I would announce, like the countdown to a spaceship launch: twenty-five minutes to go, twenty minutes to go, fifteen to go, ten and a half to go - and at that point we would get up, lock the front door carefully, and set off, the three of us, turn left as far as Mr Auster's grocery shop, then right into Zechariah Street, left into Malachi Street, right into Zephaniah Street, and straight into the chemist's to announce:

'Good afternoon to you Mr Heinemann, how are you? We've come to phone.'

He knew perfectly well, of course, that on Wednesday we would be coming to phone our relatives in Tel Aviv, and he knew that Tsvi worked at the Health Clinic, and that Hayya had an important job in the Working Women's League, and that Yigal was going to grow up to be a sportsman, and that they were good friends of Golda Meyerson (who later became Golda Meir) and of Misha Kolodny, who was known as Moshe Kol over here, but still we reminded him: 'We've come to phone to our relatives in Tel Aviv.' Mr Heinemann would say: 'Yes, of course, please take a seat.' Then he would tell us his usual telephone joke. 'Once, at the Zionist Congress in Zurich, terrible roaring sounds were suddenly heard from a side room. Berl Locker asked Harzfeld what was going on, and Harzfeld explained that it was Comrade Rubashov speaking to Ben-Gurion in Jerusalem. "Speaking to Jerusalem," exclaimed Berl Locker, "so why doesn't he use the telephone?"'

Father would say: 'I'll dial now.' And Mother said: 'It's too soon, Arieh. There's still a few minutes to go.' He would reply: 'Yes, but they have to be put through' (there was no direct dialling at that time). Mother: 'Yes, but what if for once we are put through right away, and they're not there yet?' Father replied: 'In that case we shall simply try again later.' Mother: 'No, they'll worry, they'll think they've missed us.'

While they were still arguing, suddenly it was almost five o'clock. Father picked up the receiver, standing up to do so, and said to the operator: 'Good afternoon, Madam. Would you please give me Tel Aviv 648.' (Or something like that: we were still living in a three-digit world.) Sometimes the operator would answer: 'Would you please wait a few minutes, Sir, the Postmaster is on the line.' Or Mr Sitton. Or Mr Nashashibi. And we felt quite nervous: whatever would they think of us?

I could visualise this single line that connected Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and via Tel Aviv with the rest of the world. And if this one line was engaged, we were cut off from the world. The line wound its way over wastelands and rocks, over hills and valleys, and I thought it was a great miracle. I trembled: what if wild animals came in the night and bit through the line? Or if wicked Arabs cut it? Or if the rain got into it? Or there was a fire? Who could tell. There was this line winding along, so vulnerable, unguarded, baking in the sun, who could tell. I felt full of gratitude to the men who had put up this line, so brave-hearted, so dextrous, it's not so easy, to put up a line from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv. I knew from experience: once we ran a wire from my room to Eliyahu Friedmann's room, only two houses and a garden away, and what a business it was, with the trees in the way, the neighbours, the shed, the wall, the steps, the bushes.

After waiting a while, Father decided that the Postmaster or Mr Nashashibi must have finished talking, and so he picked up the receiver again and said to the operator: 'Excuse me, Madam, I believe I asked to be put through to Tel Aviv 648.' She would say: 'I've got it written down, Sir. Please wait' (or 'Please be patient'). Father would say: 'I am waiting, Madam, naturally I am waiting, but there are people waiting at the other end too.' This was his way of hinting to her politely that although we were indeed cultured people, there was a limit to our endurance. We were well brought up people, but we weren't suckers. We were not to be led like sheep to the slaughter. That idea - that you could treat Jews any way you felt like - was over, once and for all.

Then all of a sudden the phone would ring there in the chemist's, and it was always such an exciting sound, such a magical moment, and the conversation went something like this:

'Hallo Tsvi?'

'Speaking.'

'It's Arieh here, in Jerusalem.'

'Yes Arieh, hallo, it's Tsvi here, how are you?'

'Everything is fine here. We're speaking from the chemist's.'

'So are we. What's new?'

'Nothing new here. How about at your end, Tsvi? Tell us how it's going.'

'Everything is OK. Nothing special to report. We're all well.'

'No news is good news. There's no news here either. We're all fine. How about you?'

'We're fine too.'

'That's good. Now Fania wants to speak to you.'

And then the same thing all over again. How are you? What's new? And then: 'Now Amos wants to say a few words.'

And that was the whole conversation. What's new? Good. Well, so let's speak again soon. It's good to hear from you. It's good to hear from you too. We'll write and make a time for the next call. We'll talk. Yes. Definitely. Soon. See you soon. Look after yourselves. All the best. You too.

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But it was no joke: our lives hung by a thread. I realise now that they were not at all sure they would really talk again, this might be the last time, who knew what would happen, there could be riots, a pogrom, a bloodbath, the Arabs might rise up and slaughter the lot of us, there might be a war, a terrible disaster, after all Hitler's tanks had almost reached our doorstep from two directions, North Africa and the Caucasus, who knew what else awaited us? This empty conversation was not really empty, it was just awkward.

The thing those telephone conversations reveal to me now is how hard it was for them - for everyone, not just my parents - to express private feelings. They had no difficulty at all about expressing communal feelings - they were emotional people, and they knew how to talk. Oh, how they could talk! They were capable of conversing for hours on end in excited tones about Nietzsche, Stalin, Freud, Jabotinsky, giving it everything they had, shedding tears of pathos, arguing in a singsong, about colonialism, antisemitism, justice, the 'agrarian question', the 'Question of Women', 'art versus life', but the moment they tried to give voice to a private feeling what came out was something tense, dry, even frightened, the result of generation upon generation of repression and negation. A double negation in fact, two sets of brakes, as bourgeois European manners reinforced the constraints of the religious Jewish community. Virtually everything was 'forbidden' or 'not done' or 'not very nice'.

Apart from which, there was a great lack of words: Hebrew was still not a natural enough language, it was certainly not an intimate language, and it was hard to know what would actually come out when you spoke it. They could never be certain that they would not utter something ridiculous, and ridicule was something they lived in fear of. They were scared to death of it. Even people like my parents who knew Hebrew well were not entirely its masters. They spoke it with a kind of obsession for accuracy. They frequently changed their minds, and reformulated something they had just said. Perhaps that is how a short-sighted driver feels, trying to find his way

at night through a warren of side-streets in a strange city in an unfamiliar car.

One Saturday a friend of my mother's came to visit us, a teacher by the name of Lilia Bar-Samkha. Whenever the visitor said in the course of the conversation that she had had a fright or that someone was in a frightful state, I burst out laughing. In everyday slang her word for 'fright' meant 'fart'. No one else seemed to find it funny, or perhaps they were pretending not to. It was the same when my father spoke about 'the arms race', or raged against the decision of the NATO countries to re-arm Germany as a deterrent to Stalin. He had no idea that his bookish word for 'arm' meant 'fuck' in current Hebrew slang.

As for my father, he glowered whenever I used the word 'fix': an innocent enough word, I could never understand why it got on his nerves. He never explained of course, and it was impossible for me to ask. Years later I learned that before I was born, in the thirties, if a woman got herself in a fix, it meant she was pregnant. 'That night in the packing room he got her in a fix, and in the morning the so-and-so made out he didn't know her.' So if I said that 'Uri's sister was in a fix' about something, Father used to purse his lips and clench the base of his nose. Naturally he never explained - how could he?

In their private moments they never spoke Hebrew to each other. Perhaps in their most private moments they did not speak at all. They said nothing. Everything was overshadowed by the fear of appearing or sounding ridiculous.