

We Are All Traitors

AMOS OZ JUDAS

a novel

JUDAS

Amos Oz

translated by Nicholas de Lange

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Jerusalem. And they talk, that's what they do—talk and drink tea.”

This novel, however, is more than a psychological study of domestic interactions. It is a novel of ideas that raises serious questions about whether those whom society identifies as traitors deserve that label. It's an issue close to Oz's own experiences in his role as an icon of Israel's peace movement who has consistently challenged the government for what he sees as its intransigent policies perpetuating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In return, a large swath of Israelis brands him a traitor for supporting policies that could endanger the security of the country. Oz has often countered this characterization with a claim that it is Israeli hawks, not doves, who betray Israel by corrupting its original mission and that he, the dove, is the more loyal citizen of the state.

Both people who fear change and people who do change are considered traitors.

Over the course of Shmuel's stay in Gershom's house, he ponders the stories of two men famously labeled traitors. One is the New Testament account of Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' 12 disciples, who turned his teacher over to the Roman authorities, an action that led to Jesus' crucifixion—and ultimately to Judas's suicide. The other is that of the fictional Shealtiel Abravanel, Atalia's father, who opposed David Ben-Gurion's decision to declare the State of Israel's independence in 1948. Shealtiel was ex-

pelled from a leadership position in Zionist institutions and spent the rest of his life as a pariah secluded in his home.

As he considers the characters Judas and Shealtiel, Shmuel questions and explores what a traitor is: When Judas turned Jesus over to the Romans, was he really a traitor, or perhaps the most loyal follower of Jesus' ideals? When Shealtiel opposed the creation of the State of Israel, was he really a traitor to Zionism, or its most loyal adherent?

Shmuel comes to believe that Judas was one of Jesus' most devoted followers. He revises the Judas story as one in which the disciple arranged for Jesus to be crucified only because he believed that Jesus would miraculously survive the crucifixion and thereby win the world over to his religious vision. At the same time, Shmuel becomes preoccupied with the conflicting views of Gershom and Atalia on whether, in opposing the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, Shealtiel was a national traitor. Shealtiel thought it would be a tragic mistake for Ben-Gurion and the rest of the Zionist leadership to declare the establishment of the State and that, instead, they should attempt to cooperate with the Palestinians, living together in an arrangement that transcended the form of the nation-state. Atalia finds justification for her father's political position in her assessment of the disastrous events that occurred in the wake of the State's establishment. “You wanted a state... You wanted independence,” she rages. “You shed rivers of

innocent blood. You sacrificed an entire generation. You drove hundreds of thousands of Arabs out of their homes. You sent shiploads of Holocaust survivors straight from the quayside to the battlefield. All so that there would be a Jewish state here.” Gershom, on the other hand, views Shealtiel as dangerously naïve in his belief that there could be an accommodation with the Palestinians. He praises Ben-Gurion as “the only one who noticed a tiny crack in history, and managed to get us through that crack at the

Amos Oz's novel *Habesorah Al Pi Yebudab* (*The Gospel According to Judas*), translated by his longtime collaborator, Nicholas de Lange, under the title *Judas*, opens in the winter of 1959-60, when the life of Shmuel Ash, a graduate student at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, is turned upside down. His longtime girlfriend breaks off their relationship to marry her former boyfriend, and Shmuel abandons his thesis, entitled “Jewish Views of Jesus,” for lack of anything original to write on the topic and because his parents can no longer afford to support his studies.

Shmuel takes a job as a live-in companion of Gershom Wald, an elderly, disabled, retired widower living in Jerusalem. Living with Gershom is Atalia Abravanel, a woman in her mid-40s whose marriage to Gershom's son Micha was tragically cut short when he was killed in the War of Independence. In a recent interview in *The Times of Israel*, Oz described the novel's main characters as “three unhappy people each unhappy in his or her own way, locked together in a rather claustrophobic house in Je-

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right moment, while there was still time.”

In both cases, it's not clear who is loyal and who is traitorous. At the heart of each of these two narratives is a conflict between a character who undertook to radically change reality (Judas, Ben-Gurion) and a character who sought to maintain the status quo (Jesus, Shealtiel Abravanel). In the novel, Oz suggests that the two figures who gambled to radically change reality succeeded in bringing about two revolutionary creations—Christianity and the State of Israel. Once these creations were established, however, they abandoned the best of the ideals that had inspired them. The Christians established a powerful church that engaged in religious violence against Jews and others deemed heretics. As Gershom observes to Shmuel, “Your Jesus was... a great dreamer, perhaps the greatest dreamer who ever lived. But his disciples were not dreamers. They were hungry for power and, in the end, like all those who hunger for power, they became shedders of blood.” And, as Atalia says about the founding father of Israel, “It was Ben-Gurion who was the dreamer... Ben-Gurion and the herd who followed him like the Pied Piper of Hamelin. To the slaughter. To violent expulsion. To eternal hatred between the two communities [the Jews and the Arabs].”

So who was the traitor? As Oz observes in his *Times of Israel* interview, both “people who fear change and people who do change are considered traitors.” For Oz, the history of Zionism and of the State of Israel can be viewed as an ongoing series of acts that have elements of both betrayal of and loyalty to the ideals of Jewish nationalism at the heart of Israel's identity. Neither the so-called hawks nor the so-called doves have a monopoly on either. Perhaps Oz's message is that Israel needs to keep thinking critically about what is best for the nation rather than make any assumption about who is the enemy and who is the defender of the culmination of the Zionist dream.

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