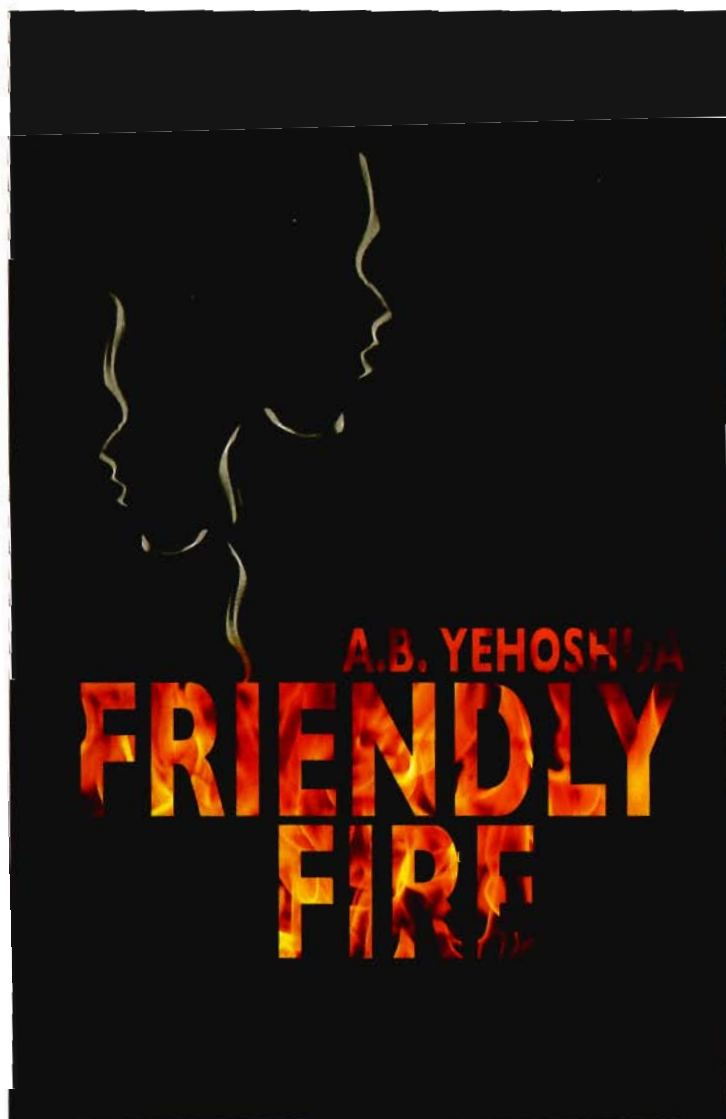


# FRIENDLY FIREBRAND

A. B. Yehoshua speaks with Adam Rovner



'I'm not a political man. If anything I'm an ideological man. I feel myself working to correct Zionism, which itself tried to correct fundamental things in Jewish history'.

A.B. Yehoshua is tired. It's late. He's on vacation in Paris. But A.B. Yehoshua wants to repair the world, so he patiently answers my questions. The tools of his trade — pen, paper, and the grandfatherly growl of his voice rumbling down the phone line — are all he has.

'I see Jewish history as it developed over the last 2000 years as a miserable history, problematic, with a bitter and terrible ending in Europe. That's why Zionism, which basically tried to correct Jewish history — to foster a connection to land, to language, to a framework of living together — was a very important corrective step. That's why, again and again, I try to reinforce this process of legitimizing Zionism to Jews and also to the world.'

Despite the hour and my many questions, Yehoshua is measured in his responses. But when he's roused, his answers pour out in a staccato of stuttered syllables. What would he correct?

'First of all the Holocaust. The Holocaust was a deep failure on our part, because we did not predict or prepare for it, despite all the red lights that warned us in advance throughout history.'

His desire to go back in time to change the past isn't new. His 1990 novel *Mr. Mani*, regarded as a masterpiece by many, presents five one-sided



conversations, each one set during an increasingly distant turning point of Jewish history, and each centered around members of a mizrahi Jewish family.

‘And particularly Jews from the land of Israel, like me,’ he adds. ‘Because these mizrahi Jews represent a minority during the periods of time the novel depicts. Clearly, as members of a minority and as people naturally tied to their homeland, they have a different perspective. And at the various historical junctures depicted in the book, they have a different perspective on historical options that were ultimately not taken.’

Speculative, what-if history is the stuff of fiction and parlour games. But for Yehoshua, literature — especially Hebrew literature — has had serious consequences.

‘Hebrew literature, which by and large was connected to the Zionist project, tried to provide a literary and aesthetic path to reinforce this particular struggle: the struggle of the sovereign Jew. Here I’m thinking of the contributions of many authors, first of all Chaim Brenner, but also S.Y. Agnon and Chaim Hazaz, and also poets such as H.N. Bialik, Shaul Tchernichovsky and Uri Zvi Greenberg — the list is a long one.’

The fact that several of the authors he mentions may be unfamiliar to contemporary readers is only one symptom of a growing estrangement between Jews in Israel and the Diaspora. Yehoshua suggests that sharing a literature and language may be a way

to bridge that gap.

‘In my opinion it is very important for Jews in the Diaspora to learn Hebrew. This will not only deepen their connection to that half of the Jewish people who live in Israel, but also deepen their understanding of the Jewish texts they read. Every Jew should know Hebrew, just as every intellectual during the medieval era knew Latin. Jews certainly should read and acquire more Israeli culture, because that will allow them to understand Israel in a different and much deeper way. Israelis, too, must better understand the problems of world Jewry through the literature, film and art that Jews in the Diaspora create.’

Our conversation is a case in point. We speak in Hebrew as two Israelis sojourning in the Diaspora. And it occurs to me that our words will be read in translation. I wonder if he’s concerned about what his work may lose in translation.

‘I’m certain that many things are understood through national codes or linguistic codes; there is a national character to a literary work. Yet I can read a Japanese or a Chinese work and understand a great deal. I don’t catch everything. There are many things that I imagine we lose, but I believe in translation. I can’t judge what gets lost.’

It’s possible, too, that something may be gained, he explains.

‘When I read reviews of my books from outside of Israel (from all sorts of places, from Greece, from

Sweden) I see that they sometimes understand things on an intimate level, from a human, psychological level. They are not immediately enslaved to the ideological narrative that's in the work, which they are sometimes unfamiliar with. So they are more attentive to the human relationships.'

His latest novel, *Friendly Fire*, due out from Halban Publishers this month, describes the intimate struggles of an Israeli family trying to make sense of its fate against the backdrop of Israel's smoldering conflicts.

## WE IN ISRAEL AREN'T BUSY WITH MORAL QUESTIONS IN LITERATURE, BUT IN LIFE.

'It describes a week in the life of a couple, fairly old, about sixty, when they are apart for a week. They live in Israel. The husband is an elevator engineer, and the wife travels to Africa to visit her brother-in-law, Yirmiyahu, the husband of her sister, who died a year or so earlier. Her sister and brother-in-law had a son who was killed six years earlier by friendly fire in the territories. So she goes to visit him in Tanzania for a week, to be with him, and to speak about her sister, about life. Meanwhile, her husband continues with his work in Israel during that same week. The book comprises 112 short chapters. So we move between a short chapter in Israel, a short chapter in Africa, a short chapter in Israel, and a short chapter in Africa. It's structured as a duet.'

As in his early novellas, *Facing the Forest* and *Early in the Summer of 1970*, and several of his later works, including *The Lover*, *Five Seasons*, and *The Liberated Bride*, Yehoshua presents readers of his new novel with characters for whom personal grief expands to fill the contours of national grievance.

'*Friendly Fire* is a book that exudes great pessimism. When Daniella, the woman, arrives in Africa to speak with Yirmiyahu, whom she's known since her school days, she suddenly finds him embittered and angry, and basically a man who truly wants to disconnect himself from everything that is Jewish. Now he's someone who says, "I don't want to hear anything about what's going on in Israel, about what's happening to Jews. Here, I am in a place where there's never been any Jewish action or Jewish memory. I want to disconnect, I'm seventy, and I'm allowed to be disconnected.'"

One might be forgiven for thinking that Yehoshua

struggles with the same sense of despair as his protagonist. But he is quick to distance himself from his creation.

'He's not on the side of preserving or correcting. It's not about returning to better days. He arrives at one word: disconnection.'

Yehoshua is anything but disconnected from Jewish life and history. For him, living in Israel demonstrates his commitment to an all-encompassing identity.

'I'm always saying that an Israeli, in his identity, is a total Jew. Everything done in the Diaspora is also part of my nationality, my identity. And religion is an important part of my culture, even though I'm clearly a secular man. Religion is a deep expression of many things in Jewish history and culture and thought. So when I negate existence in the Diaspora, I'm not negating what was created in the Diaspora. A British person doesn't negate the royal family, or Cromwell, or the Civil War, or feudalism — that's part of his British identity.'

His insistence on maintaining a 'total' Jewish identity leaves him skeptical of the emphasis placed on textual study in the Diaspora. To Yehoshua, scholarship is one way to explore rather than establish Jewish identity. Given the number of ineffectual, isolated scholars or students in his work, his criticisms shouldn't be surprising.

## THE PALESTINIANS KNOW WHAT HOMELAND MEANS. IF ONLY WE HAD AS STRONG AN ATTACHMENT TO HOMELAND AS THE PALESTINIANS DO.

'I think the fact that some people build their identity only on texts is not healthy. I build my identity on life, on the sovereign relations between people, on making decisions in real life. The fact that someone sits in a synagogue somewhere and interprets some medieval text and thinks that through the text he forms his identity is, in my eyes, very meagre compared to the force of the problems I deal with from a moral perspective, from an existential perspective. Is it the case that someone in Mexico who reads Shakespeare in Spanish is like an Englishman living in England?'

And despite his belief in the value of Israel-Diaspora cultural exchange, he expresses impatience with



those whose engagement with Jewish life begins and ends with literature.

'I want them to read texts, but different texts. I would like them to read the opinions of our Supreme Court, and discuss them, for better or for worse, to discuss the I.D.F.'s ethical codes, for better or for worse, to debate very complex moral questions. That would make me happier than if they read Rambam yet again, or read Shimon Bar-Yochai, or the Zohar again. It's important to note that we in Israel aren't busy with moral questions in literature, but in life. What are the sizes of the jail cells? How does one face down a violent protest by Palestinians? How does one decide between security and the civil rights of a people we occupy? In short, real-life problems from which texts accumulate, like the Talmudic texts that were created from real problems in the past.'

So if literature and language are not a strong enough foundation for the People of the Book, what is?

'Homeland. But just like you say "family," or you say "mother" or "father," it's become a very, very devalued word, a trivialized word in Jewish culture. Homeland is not just a territory in the sense of geography, but also a language, and the framework of life, the codes of behavior, all these things are a homeland. In my eyes we must rehabilitate this element of Jewish identity. This is an element that was very damaged, very weakened for generations. I see how easily Israelis leave Israel, because historically speaking they have a problem with connecting to a homeland. That's why I want to strengthen the concept of homeland. The gene, that's how I call it: strengthen that gene in the Israeli DNA.'

Of course, given the long tradition of Jewish dispersion and assimilation, as well the current trend towards globalization, there seems little to keep an ambitious young Israeli in Israel. Yehoshua is well aware of the challenge.

'The Diaspora is a danger to Israel because it represents an option for Israelis to leave their homeland and still maintain a Jewish identity. And in a time of crisis, perhaps it will be too difficult to resist the temptation. More than three quarters of a million Israelis now live abroad, and in an age of globalization it will only continue to get worse.'

And despite his misgivings about our sometimes too-bookish people, he feels that Hebrew literature can make a difference.

'I think that literature can strengthen this connection to homeland. You see the landscape, you feel it and you connect with it. Literature presents, especially by way of its physical descriptions, all those things

that are connected to homeland on the traditional level. The Palestinians know what homeland means. If only we had as strong an attachment to homeland as the Palestinians do.

His abrupt acknowledgment of the Palestinians' passion for homeland stands in sharp contrast to his rebuke of the religious settler movement for theirs — an attachment grounded in traditional Jewish texts.

'The settlers are attached to a homeland, but it's not their homeland, it's someone else's. That they love the land of Israel is all well and good, but at whose expense? They want to dispossess others. I'm speaking about a homeland that is possible, a homeland that is a state. They love Hebron, and Nablus, and Jenin — I've got no opposition to that. The problem is, what does that mean for others?'

But Yehoshua reserves particular scorn for intellectuals in the Diaspora who propose solutions that deny a connection to a homeland.

'Because they are far away, they can come up with all kinds of ideas. So what are they talking about, where is this post-nationalism? I don't know what post-national is. I only see nationalism strengthening in the world. I'd like to see the British willing to give up their nationalism, their flag. They don't even want to adopt the Euro. When I see the world giving up its nationalism, I too will give up mine.'

As for Israelis who have revived plans for a bi-national state, Yehoshua dismisses them vehemently.

'Bi-nationalism is a complete disaster. A complete disaster. Bi-nationalism doesn't work anywhere. Not even in Belgium, where you have two nationalities who aren't even very nationalistic. Bi-nationalism between Jews and Palestinians will mean death to both peoples. It's impossible. They are two different peoples, in their religion, in their history, two nations who are connected externally: the Palestinians to the Arabs, and we to the Jewish world. What kind of bi-nationalism can there possibly be?'

So what does an author who describes himself as non-political suggest?

'There's a clear national path: two states, two borders. And that's that.'

*Adam Rovner is an assistant professor of English and Jewish Literature at the University of Denver. He also serves as the Hebrew translations editor for Zeek: A Jewish Journal of Thought and Culture.*