

The Place of the Hebrew Writer in the Revival of Zionism

A. B. Yehoshua

Thank you very much. I will give just an outline of some ideas concerning the place and the function of Israeli writers in society. Of course, I cannot speak about all writers, but I speak about the tendency of Israeli literature and Israeli writers in the last about, let's say, a 100 years, vis-à-vis reality.

First of all, I have to say regarding the function of writers in public affairs—and here in Japan you have your own experience with some of your writers – that every country has its own experience of the function and activity of writers in the public domain, in politics, in social problems, identity problems etcetera etcetera.

So there is, of course, a demand also from the public for the writer himself to be involved. I don't say that the whole public likes what the writer may say, but it is very common and very frequent that the public ask the writer to express his opinion on general national affairs and moral matters in society.

We would not like a German writer reviewing the Second World War to only write a love story without referring to the situation. And I think that it is very important that some writers—and you have your examples, of course, in Japanese literature of writers who are very aggressive—have very well-established opinions about matters of national security and national identity problems, and of course, questions of politics.

Regarding Israeli writers, first of all we have to remember that the Zionist movement was founded by writers. This is something especially unusual. The people who founded, who created Zionism, some of the most important figures among them, were professional writers. First of all Herzl; Herzl—the father of Zionism, the man who created Zionism—was a journalist and a playwright. It is astonishing to see that a writer among others, not a rabbi, not a community leader, not a rich man, but a writer brought the idea of Zionism to the Jewish people, especially a writer who was on the margin of Jewish society, who was himself a very assimilated Jew, writing in German. And he was the founder of the Zionist movement.

And you can take other figures like Nordau, like Lilienblum, like Jabotinsky, like Akhad Ha'am and other figures who are very important in Zionist history. Their profession, their inner identity was that of a writer. And this is a question by itself: why was it writers and not other kinds of people who

saw the solution of Zionism, saw the catastrophe that was waiting for the Jewish people, and said to the Jewish people: change yourself, you cannot change the world, but you can change yourself. And this point is important in order to understand the tradition of the involvement of the Jewish writer in the framework of Israeli society today. We, the writers of Israel, see ourselves continuing a kind of tradition, a kind of obligation, a kind of duty towards our forefathers, writers who helped create Zionism.

The second thing that it is important to understand concerning the uniqueness of the involvement of Israeli writers in public affairs, is the tradition of the prophets. And I say this because if you look in the Bible, you will see the special place of prophecy and of the prophet in the recorded protocol of the Jewish people. You will see books of prophets who spoke against the king, against the government, against the people from time to time. And what survived was what they were saying and not the response of the government, not the response of the king. We see Isaiah, we see Jeremiah, we see Ezekiel, we see all the twelve Minor Prophets, and we see how the people preserved what they said which was mainly against the people, including a lot of things that were very harsh prophecies against the people. And yet there was a tradition to respect the prophet who was speaking against the people, who was criticizing the people, who was trying to correct the people by saying to them: you are not going in the right way; this was written down and not the response of the kings and the kingdom. It is like, I would say, taking the protocols of all the parliaments in England or France and preserving only what the opposition said, omitting what the government said.

So in this way, I have to say that there is a certain respect, a fundamental respect of writers in general in Israel and their involvement in public affairs. I can even say that there is a public demand for writers: speak, say what is your opinion, what is your comment, what is your criticism. This is something that exists in Israeli society. And I have to say from my experience and the experience of my colleagues that this was so even in the days when we were in the very tiny opposition to the government, meaning the majority was against our views, especially after the Six-Day War. And still nobody tried to silence us. On the contrary, all channels of communication were open to us, even if the majority of the public was against what we were saying. And this is to the honor of the Israeli public in general and of the Jewish tradition regarding what we can call the “intellectual” or what we call *Ish ruach*, a person of a spirit, whatever you wish to call him.

Of course, this was on condition that we did not enter into the real political play. It was when we were speaking from an objective attitude, from our hearts, from our understanding, but when we entered politics itself, meaning being candidates in the election or being involved in the actual activities of a party, immediately credibility fell. It meant that respect was decreasing because they

were saying: we will hear you even when you say the most unpleasant things, but on condition that you speak from your heart and not from within the framework of a political party. And especially if it was when we were interfering—and I have to say that we did interfere from time to time—in politics, saying: elect this or that candidate and do not elect the other, immediately I felt that my credibility was falling vis-à-vis the public.

So the question is what gives the writer his authority, his credibility to speak, rather than other kinds of artists: more than painters, more than musicians, more than dancers and more than any other men of art? First of all, the question of language. Through language we can see matters more clearly. We are very sensitive to the correct meaning of language, to the fact that in language you can cheat—and you know very well how much politicians can cheat through language, how they can use demagogic language in order to cover things that are unpleasant. So the questions of purifying the language, being responsible for the language, this is our task as writers and this is our task also in the public domain. So in this sense, it is very important for the writer to take his place in the examination and criticism of the wrong kind of language.

The second thing that gives the writer his credibility or the demand that he will be involved in matters of public, social and political affairs is the moral question. The writer in his writing, in writing an article, in writing a story, in the writing itself more than a painter or musician, has to examine and must face all the time questions of moral relationships. When he describes a husband and a wife in his novel or he describes the relationship between parents and children, or whatever he describes in a human situation, he knows immediately he has to include a moral component, there is a moral judgment. He has to create, because in every human relationship, there is a moral question. So the question of morality is something that is part of his profession. And this is the reason why when there is a public problem, when there are moral problems, he comes forward, he is more sensitive and more, I would say, confident to pass moral judgment. And politics and questions of public affairs always deal with morals. And the judgment, a moral judgment, is always necessary.

I have to say that also the fact that the writer always when he creates a situation, has to write the one side, but also the other side. He has to put himself in the shoes of another person. This is writing. When Flaubert wrote about Madame Bovary, he had to be Madame Bovary. He had to understand this woman and he had to be in her—I would say dress, I wouldn't say shoes—of Madame Bovary, as he used to say, *Madame Bovary c'est moi*, "I am Madame Bovary."

So to understand this woman he had to take himself out of his personality and identity and turn himself into another identity. In public affairs, in questions of war and peace, in the questions of relationship with other peoples, you have from time to time to understand the other people, to be in

the shoes of another people, to be in the identity of another people through your imagination. The writer has this capacity from his profession, and he can transfer this capacity also to questions of politics.

These were some of the points concerning the involvement of writers in Israel in the public sphere. I have to say one more thing and I will finish. My generation—I am already 75, 76 in two months—this generation was very active after the Six-Day War. The outcome of the Six-Day War created some very sharp moral questions, and we have been involved in this sense and we have been participating very much as a result of this. People have said to me: you are damaging your writing by being so much involved in writing articles etcetera. I don't regret it; perhaps I have damaged my writing and so have my colleagues. But it was important to do my duty as a citizen, because first of all, I'm a citizen and only secondly a writer.

Thank you.