

The Schmooze

Stories with a Yiddish Twist

EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT AMOS OZ'S MOTHER, FANIA

by
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Syosset, New York

1982: Ingrid Bergman played Golda Meir in the film, “A Woman Called Golda”

1997: Natalie Portman plays Anne in the B’way adaptation of “The Diary of Anne Frank”

2004: Tovah Feldshuh played Golda Meir in the B’way show, “Golda’s Balcony”

2015: Natalie Portman plays Amos Oz’s mother, Fania

Oscar-winning, Natalie Portman, was born in Jerusalem and lived in my hometown, Syosset, New York. She stars in a new film, “A Tale of Love and Darkness.” Note: The Yiddish word for “darkness” is “finsternish.”

Natalie Portman’s great-grandparents were killed in Auschwitz. It came as a bit of a shocker when Portman stated that maybe the Jewish community is a little TOO STUCK on the Holocaust:

“I think a really big question the Jewish community needs to ask itself, is how much at the forefront we put Holocaust education. Which is, of course, an important question to remember and to respect (“derekh-erets”), but not over other things. We need to be reminded that hatred exists at all times and reminds us to be

empathetic to other people that have experienced hatred also.
Not used as a paranoid way of thinking that we are victims.”

The movie is based on celebrated Israeli writer (“shrayber”), Amos Oz’s 2002 autobiographical novel of the same name. It depicts the writer’s mother, Fania, in the Hebrew-language film. Portman plays the part of Oz’s mother.

Amos Oz (born Amos Klausner) is Israel’s most famous living author. His work has been published in 42 languages, including Arabic, in 43 countries.

According to Peter Debruge, Chief Int’l Film Critic, “Natalie Portman felt so fiercely drawn to the character. Most likely, it was simply a case of her being touched by Oz’s work and wanting to share that emotional experience with others. Portman’s name will attract interest beyond Israel.”

Oz, a shortish man with tousled gray hair and reading glasses. In his younger (“yinger”) days he resembled an Israeli version of Robert Redford. In “A Tale of Love and Darkness,” he writes, “My father taught me to look for the truth and my mother taught me to look underneath each truth.” Like Elie Wiesel, he will not let what was lost go unforgotten.

What do we know about Fania?

- . Oz’s mother came from Rivne (now in the Ukraine, but then part of Russia.)
- . She arrived in Palestine and married Klausner.
- . She was a highly sensitive and cultured daughter of a wealthy (“raykh”) mill owner who attended Charles University in Prague. Here she studied history (“geshikhte”) and philosophy (“filosofye”). She was driven out of there by anti-semitism.
- . Fania had to abandon her studies when her father’s business collapsed in the Great Depression.
- . She spoke four or five different languages, but could read in seven or eight. However, she was not comfortable speaking in Hebrew.
- . Fania suffered from depression (“more-shkhoyre”), committed suicide at age 38, when Oz was 12. Oz would later explore the repercussions of

this event in his memoir. Fania ended her life in her sister's flat on Ben Yehuda Street in Tel Aviv, overdosing on medication prescribed to treat her depression.

- . "A week or so before her death my mother suddenly got much better. A new sleeping pill prescribed by a new doctor worked miracles overnight." Oz. quote
- . "We sat for half an hour or so in a German Jewish cafe...Till the rain stopped. Meanwhile, Mother took a little powder compact and a comb from her handbag....I felt a mixture of emotions: pride in her looks, joy that she was better, responsibility to guard and protect her from some shadow whose existence I could only guess at. In fact, I did not guess, I only sensed a slight strange uneasiness in my skin. The way a child sometimes grasps without really grasping things that are beyond his understanding, senses them and is alarmed without knowing why: 'Are you all right, Mother?'"
Oz, from "A Tale of Love and Darkness"
- . Fania wrote poetry and told Oz stories peopled by giants, witches, fairies, tales that come from places where there were forests.

And speaking of fairy tales, Audrey Niffenegger said, "Think for a minute, darling: in fairy tales it's always the children who have the fine adventures. The mothers have to stay home and wait for the children to fly in the window."

("The Time Traveler's Wife")

Why do writers like Amos Oz write about their mothers? The late Erma Bombeck gave the answer in "When God Created Mothers":

When the Good Lord was creating mothers, He was into His sixth day of "overtime" when the angel appeared and said, "You're doing a lot of fiddling around on this one."

And God said, "Have you read the specs on this order?" She has to be completely washable, but not plastic. Have 180 moveable parts...all replaceable. Run on black coffee and leftovers. Have a lap that disappears when she stands up. A kiss that can cure anything from a broken leg to a disappointed love affair. And six pairs of hands."

The angel shook her head slowly and said, "Six pairs of hands...no way."

“It’s not the hands that are causing me problems,” God remarked, “it’s the three pairs of eyes that mothers must have.”

“That’s on the standard model?” asked the angel. God nodded.

“One pair that sees through closed doors when she asks, ‘What are you kids doing in there?’ When she already knows. Another here in the back of her head that sees what she shouldn’t but what she has to know, and of course, the ones here in front that can look at a child when he goofs up and say, ‘I understand and I love you.’ without so much as uttering a word.”

“God,” said the angel touching his sleeve gently, “Get some rest tomorrow....”

“I can’t,” said God, “I’m so close to creating something so close to myself. Already I have one who heals herself when she is sick...can feed a family of six on one pound of hamburger...and can get a nine-year-old to stand under a shower.”

The angel circled the model of a mother very slowly. “It’s too soft,” she sighed.

“But touch!” said God excitedly. “You can imagine what this mother can do or endure.”

“Can it think?”

“Not only can it think, but it can reason and compromise,” said the Creator.

Finally, the angel bent over and ran her finger across the cheek.

“There’s a leak,” she pronounced.

“I told you that You were trying to put too much into this model.”

“It’s not a leak,” said the Lord. “It’s a tear.”

“What’s that for?”

“It’s for joy, sadness, disappointment, pain, loneliness, and pride.”

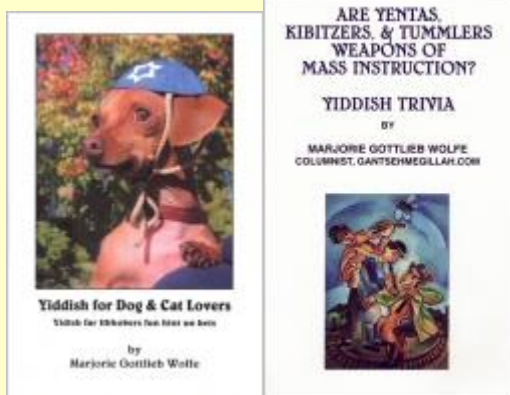
“You’re a genius,” said the angel.

Somberly, God said, “I didn’t put it there.”

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Marjorie Gottlieb Wolfe is the author of two books:



"Yiddish for Dog & Cat Lovers" and "Are Yentas, Kibitzers, & Tumblers Weapons of Mass Instruction? Yiddish Trivia." To order a copy, go to her website: MarjorieGottliebWolfe.com

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