

Uri Avnery,
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Lover of the Country

ON THE morrow of the Six-day War, Amos Kenan came to my editorial office. He was in a state of shock. As a reserve soldier, he had just witnessed the emptying of three villages in the Latrun area. Men and women, old people and children, had been driven out in the burning June sun on a foot march in the direction of Ramallah, dozens of kilometers away. It reminded him of sights from the Holocaust.

I told him to sit down there and then and write an eye-witness account. I rushed to the Knesset (of which I was then a member) and delivered the report to the Prime Minister, Levy Eshkol, and to several ministers, including Menachem Begin and Victor Shem-Tov. But it was too late – the villages had already been razed to the ground. In their place, the Canada Park was created later on with the help of that country, to its lasting shame.

(On the other hand, another eye-witness account, about the destruction of the town of Qalqiliya, did help. After I delivered the report to the ministers, the destruction was stopped and the destroyed neighborhoods were even rebuilt.)

Kenan's report is a human and literary document. It says much about its author, who died this week. Amos Kenan was a moral person.

THE COUNTRY was the center of his mental universe. It was the focus of his world-view, his life-work and his actions. I don't hesitate to say: he was the lover of this country.

In his youth, he belonged for a time to the "Canaanite" group and adopted some of their ideas. But he drew from them the opposite conclusions from those of their founder, the poet Yonatan Ratosh, who denied the very notion of Arab nationhood, as well as the existence of the Palestinian Arab people. Kenan, like me, was convinced that the future of Israel was bound up with the future of Palestine, because the common land commands a partnership of the two peoples.

(A personal remark: when a person eulogizes somebody, he always mentions himself, and this often raises eyebrows. I think that this cannot be avoided: the eulogizer speaks about the eulogized as he knew him, and so the personality of the eulogized is reflected in the mirror of the eulogizer. So please forgive me, if you can.)

I first met him during the 1948 war, on one of my short leaves. At a friend's place, I bumped into the young soldier (he was fully four years younger than I), who was also on leave.

He was born in the country and had been a member of the left-wing Hashomer Hatzair ("The Youth Guard") movement, whose idealistic-moral ideology certainly helped to shape his character. Like many leftist youngsters at the time, he joined the Lehi (Stern Group) underground, which then had a pro-Soviet orientation. With the founding of the state, all Lehi members were drafted into the new Israeli army.

Before that he took part in the atrocious Irgun and Lehi action in Deir Yassin. He had a problem dealing with this - and he always asserted that the massacre was not intended, or that it did not take place at all. He maintained that the commander was killed and that the control over the fighters was lost. He himself was wounded at the beginning of the action, he asserted, and did not see what happened. I was not wholly convinced.

We discovered that we had similar ideas about the future of the newly founded state. We both believed that we had created not only a new state, but also a new nation – the Hebrew nation, which is not just another part of the Jewish Diaspora, but a new entity altogether, with a new culture and a new character. Since this nation was born in the country, it does not belong to Europe or America, but to the region of which it is a part, and all the peoples of this region are our natural allies.

On this basis we objected to the 1956 war, in which Israel put itself at the

service of two tainted colonialist regimes, the French and the British. While the war was still going on, a group came together and decided to outline another path for the state. We called ourselves "Semitic Action", and apart from Kenan and myself, our number included the former Lehi leader Nathan Yellin-Mor, Boaz Evron and other good people. Within a year we published a document entitled "The Hebrew Manifesto", with more than a hundred points, which proposed a revolutionary new approach to almost all the state's problems. Its main points: We are a new nation born in this country. Next to the State of Israel, the State of Palestine must come into being. The two states should form a federation, which may also include Jordan. The Arab citizens of Israel must be full partners in the fabric of the state, which will be totally separate from religion.

Since at that time all the Palestinian territories were under occupation - Jordanian in the West Bank and Egyptian in the Gaza Strip, we wanted Israel to supply the Palestinians with money, arms and a radio station, to help them to rise up and liberate themselves. Israel was of course allied with the Jordanian regime.

Immediately after the 1967 Six-Day War, the same group set up an organization called "Federation Israel-Palestine", in which Kenan also played a role. We advocated the immediate founding of the State of Palestine in all the Palestinian territories that we had just conquered, and the setting up of a federation of Israel and Palestine. Many who opposed this then, now recognize that it was the right idea at the right moment.

In 1974, when I was the first "Zionist" Israeli to establish secret contacts with the PLO leadership, I tried, in accord with them, to set up a public body in Israel to continue the contacts openly. Several meetings were held, a lot of discussion took place, and nothing came of it. So we decided to take the bull by the horns: we published a call

for the creation of an organization for Israeli-Palestinian peace. The call bore three signatures: Yossi Amitai, Amos Kenan and me. (Actually, Kenan was in France at the time, but before leaving he had given me permission to put his signature on any document I saw fit.)

This call led to the creation of the "Israeli Council for Israeli-Palestinian Peace", whose founding manifesto was signed by a hundred personalities, including General Matti Peled, Eliyahu Eliashar (the president of the Sephardic community), Lova Eliav, David Shaham, Alex Massis, Amnon Zichroni and Colonel Meir Pa'il.)

At that time, Ariel Sharon also flirted with us. It was after the Yom Kippur War and the "Battle of the Generals" (among themselves), and after Sharon had left the Likud which he had created. He wanted to attract Kenan, me and, I believe, Yossi Sarid. He organized a private exhibition of Kenan's paintings at his home, and asked me to set up a meeting between him and Yasser Arafat. His idea was to found a new party which would attract "the best of both the Left and the Right". Amos gave the party the name of his eldest daughter, Shlomtzion, but in the end Sharon set up a right-wing party, and after its poor showing in the 1977 elections, rejoined the Likud.

THE POLITICAL aspect, important as it was, was only one of Kenan's many parts. He was a satirist, writer, poet, painter, sculptor, gardener, chef and who knows what else, a real renaissance person. But all these parts had one common denominator: the country.

On the roof of his home he cultivated dozens of local herbs and spices which he used in his cooking, of which he was inordinately proud. As a writer and a poet, he made an important contribution to the birth of the new Hebrew language: a local, Sabra language, simple, precise, far from the language of the Mishna and the language of the celebrated writer S.I. Agnon, which even young writers like Moshe Shamir were aping. Kenan wrote his essays, books and plays in vernacular but perfect Hebrew.

His star began to rise with his humorous column in Haaretz, "Uzi and Co." He was able to express the deepest truths in a trenchant satire of a few lines. Some of these are Hebrew classics.

In July 1952, the religious minister of transportation, David-Zvi Pinkas, published regulations that practically prohibited the use of cars on the Shabbat. Many of us joined forces to battle this religious coercion and demonstrated in the center of Tel Aviv. But Amos went further: he laid a bomb at the door to Pinkas' apartment. He was caught red-handed, indicted, stubbornly refused to talk and finally acquitted for "lack of evidence".

When the chief of the Tel Aviv police personally went to interrogate him in prison and offered to talk with him "man to man", Kenan countered calmly "the weather today is fine".

As a result of this affair, Kenan was compelled to leave Haaretz, and I welcomed him with open arms to Haolam Hazeh. He contributed to our magazine some of the finest writings we published, some of them almost prophetic.

On his request we sent him to Paris. There he soon found his place among the intellectual elite and moved in with the young French writer, Christiane Rochefort, who wrote

her first book about him ("Le Repos du Guerrier"), which was made into a film with Brigitte Bardot. There he also fell in love with a visitor from Israel, a young woman who accepted his offer to stay in his coal cellar, and they married. Nurit Gertz was the exact opposite of him and, I believe, the sole human being in the world able to live with him for long.

When I came to France for the first time, Kenan arranged a meeting with Jean-Paul Sartre, who liked our ideas about Israeli-Palestinian peace. I remember his words to me (in French): "Monsieur, you rolled a stone from my heart. I cannot approve of the policy of the Israeli government, but I also don't want to condemn it, because I do not want to find myself in the same camp with the anti-Semites I detest. When you come from Israel and propose a new path for it, I am happy."

After that Amos and I went to a huge demonstration against the war in Algeria, and the flics beat us both indiscriminately.

KENAN WAS a man of quarrel and strife, who was quick to lose his temper and become aggressive. He had a tendency to hurt those who loved him. "There is only one way not to quarrel with you," I once told him, "and that is to cut off all relations and not to speak with you."

The last time we quarreled was when Gush Shalom called for a boycott on the products of the settlements. Kenan refused to join, ostensibly because we included the Golan settlements. "I don't want to give up the Golan wine," he said half in jest. But he hated the settlements, not only because they were built to obstruct peace with the Palestinians, but also because they symbolized in his eyes the general uglification of the country. He told me once that when looking out of the window of an aircraft he had suddenly realized that "the State of Israel has destroyed the Land of Israel."

In her semi-biographical book about her husband, which appeared not long ago in Hebrew, Nurit Gertz talks about his difficult childhood, when his father was in a mental institution. I suspect that throughout his life, he suffered from a hidden fear that he might inherit the disease. That may explain his bouts of alcoholism. Fortunately for him, he had an extraordinary mother, Mrs Levin, a short, vigorous and resolute woman who raised Amos and his two younger brothers practically on her own.

The only times I saw his face soften was when he was looking at Nurit or their two daughters, Shlomtzion and Rona. I could forgive him all the offensive and abusive attacks, because his creative talent was so much more important.

HE ALREADY disappeared from the landscape some years ago, when he fell victim to Alzheimer's disease. Actually, he faded away together with the culture he had helped to create.

The Hebrew culture which was born in the early 40s died in the 60s. The heavy losses of our generation in the 1948 war and the mass immigration that flooded the state in its first few years meant the death of this unique culture and its replacement by the banal Israeli culture as it is now.

Amos Kenan's death marks the exit of one of that Hebrew culture's last remaining exponents.