

A Conversation with Prof. Amnon Rubinstein

Prof. Amnon Rubinstein is one of the most prestigious figures at IDC. His impressive CV includes his role as a professor and former president of IDC, a long history as a Knesset Member (1977-2001), service as a minister in several governments, dozens of publications, an 'Israel Prize', offers to serve as the president, and much more. However, not all of his students know he is also a successful novelist. Prof. Rubinstein has published three novels so far, and the fourth is coming out in libraries in the near future

By Jonathan Kahan

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"Forbidden Loves" is the story of two problematic love affairs; one in 1996, between Amalya, a professor at Tel Aviv university, and Saul, one of her students, who is thirty years younger than her. The second affair occurs in 1947, between a mandatory British Sergeant, Mervyn, and Amalya's mother, Rivka. The background of the latter, the struggle for Jewish independence in mandatory Palestine, is a historically accurate reconstruction of those troublesome years.

"1947 was a very eventful year in the history of Palestine", Prof. Rubinstein tells me in his office at the IDC campus. "There were three major events. First, the 'Etzel' penetrated a high security prison in Akko, released the prisoners, thus striking a major blow against British prestige. As a result, the British condemned to death three of the militants who had broken into the prison, though they had not been accused of killing or harming anybody physically. The 'Etzel' organized an operation in order to save them. They decided to kidnap two British sergeants, who were unrelated to the events, from a café in Natanya and take them as hostages. Both in Palestine and in Britain this event made a great ado. The whole Yishuv was looking for the soldiers in order to release them, and there were appeals, both in Palestine and in

Britain, to release prisoners on both sides. The situation came to a turning point when the British finally decided to hang the 'Etzel' militants, thus sparking the retaliation of the 'Etzel', who also killed their prisoners".

We are briefly interrupted by a phone call, which gives me the opportunity to notice the pleasant musical background: Handel. "But I especially enjoy Mozart, particularly his operas", Prof. Rubinstein tells me later.



The cover of Prof. Rubinstein's book, "Forbidden Loves"

"The events narrated in the book coincided with the arrival of the ship Exodus", he goes on. "All of this was taking place only few months before the State of Israel was declared, when the UN was debating about the future of the Mandate. I

connected to these historical events, which at the time were earth shaking, and made only one simple change: I imagined that one of the kidnapped British sergeants, Mervyn Paice, had a Jewish girlfriend whom he got pregnant. The novel is the story of that girl, who in 1996 is the mother of a professor of literature at Tel Aviv University, and the two forbidden love affairs are the one between the mother and the sergeant (“sleep with the enemy”) and between the daughter and a young student whom she falls in love with. The two stories are connected by the fact that the student, a pacifist inspired by the ideas of Tolstoy and Gandhi, strongly identifies himself with the sergeant, who could be his lover’s father”.

Prof. Rubinstein’s book thus handles interesting themes, like love in time of war and the interaction between an individual’s action and historical events. “Historical action in Israel and in the Jewish people is extremely important because of an eventful and tragic history. In Israel, the past is full of drama and tension, so that it would be a mistake to disregard it. In all of my books there is a very strong historical setting, to which I add my heroes”.

But it’s not only Rubinstein’s characters who act within a historical context. He himself often struggled with his own times to introduce change. “As a minister”, he tells me, “it was hard work, but I did introduce many reforms that changed Israel for better. Most ministers are so conservative and opposed to change that any innovative minister stands out and leaves his stamp on reality. When I became minister of communication in 1985, Israel was a third-world country for what concerns telecommunications. You had a 4-5

years waiting period to get a telephone, everything was nationalized, and there was no competition, no price reductions... The reforms opened the market and encouraged the Israeli high-tech industry and that was very important. As education minister, I carried on the reforms, allowing the creation of non-university colleges; back then this was extremely controversial, and the universities did not like it. But Prime Minister Rabin always stood by my side, and even increased the ministry’s budget by reducing the defence budget. He was a very unique man. Also thanks to him I encouraged more and more youth to do their 'bagrut' and raised the percentage of 'bagrut' applicants from 32% to 48% in three years. I also tried to lower the difference between centre and periphery, so that the gap between the haves and the have-nots has been drastically reduced”.

When asked about his greatest achievement, Prof. Rubinstein is very sure. “The basic law on human rights and dignity. This changed the whole structure of society, not only from the legal point of view. ‘Human rights and dignity’ became an actual catchphrase. This left a deep imprint on Israel, and is still doing so”.

Israel is well known for the activism of the Supreme Court in the political life of the country. This phenomenon can be seen either as the legitimate stance of a highly respected institution on core issues of democracy and human rights, but also as the undue influence of an organism which is not democratically elected and which oversteps its field competence.

“I oppose judicial activism when it comes to issues which are not

in the national consensus. That is dangerous. But I am very much in favour of judicial activism when it is about defending human rights. I believe in judicial review of the legislation”.



Prof. Amnon Rubinstein

Professor Rubinstein agrees there is still much to be done in defence of human rights and liberty. “First of all, all religious monopoly of the rabbinate on religious marriage, divorce and conversion, there should be one law for all. The number one problem in Israel is the absence of civil marriage. I hope that one day we will join the European Union and will be forced to create it. One distant day, maybe that will happen. The other thing is educating people to be more tolerant towards citizens who are different from them. Another problem is the growing gap between rich and poor. The solution is again better education which if equally spread, can turn the country in a one-class society. The market will do the rest”.

And then, of course there are external threats, “Principally, Iran. Being in Israel you cannot but think that we are an island, who should of course be stronger militarily,

economically, but also in international relations. Right now, we are cutting ourselves out of the international community, and this happens because a small group of settlers force us to take decisions which are against the future of this country. Israel should develop a whole new identity, so that we will not be left alone here in the Middle East.

Amnon Rubinstein describes himself as a liberal, and was active for many years in the NGO ‘Liberals International’. But he is also a fervent Zionist. It is clear that, after sixty years, Israel has not yet solved its existential interior dilemma, which is to conciliate the Jewish character of the State with democratic and liberal values. “If the Jewish state is a religious state, the two things do not meet. But to me Judaism is more than religion; it is a nationality and a culture. It is not an easy concept, but this is what Zionism is based upon, in Herzl’s vision, and I believe in that. In a Jewish State, all citizens should be equal. That’s what ‘Altneuland’ is about. Here at IDC we also interpret this vision: we have Jews, Arabs, Christians, we have refugees from Darfur, all studying together.”

I ask Prof. Rubinstein about post-Zionism and anti-Zionism. “I think Post-Zionism is legitimate, but I react very bitterly at anti-Zionism, which is very spread today in Israeli universities. I always find it funny that people who advocate a Palestinian State do not advocate a Jewish state, and it is a big paradox. Revisionism is ok if it is founded on facts. I am not a relativist, I believe there are facts. Clearly, they can be reviewed and interpreted. It is legitimate to say that in 1948 not all Palestinians left on their own initiative, but were kicked out by the Israelis. But it needs to be based



on facts. Non-factual revision is simply a way to trash history.

Born in mandate-era Tel Aviv, Amnon Rubinstein has witnessed the entire history of the State of Israel, and has taken active part in its evolution. What does he see when he looks at present day Israel? Is he satisfied or disappointed?

“I like a few things and I dislike many things. When the State was founded, no one dreamt that Israel would host six million Jews, and that it would have a thriving economy. But from the political point of view, it is quite a disappointment. And by this I mean rabbis who are getting together and declaring that Jews should not rent house to Arabs or to Africans. I would never have imagined we would reach such a low point. I myself appealed to the Attorney General, asking him to indict these rabbis. I just got back a letter stating that he may do that. I find it terrible that only religious Jews are a part of this incitement against Arabs and immigrants. I am sure there are other residents who see this penetration of immigrants who don't share the same values into Israel, they too suffer from this. I agree that Israel cannot be a centre of absorption for all African immigrants. But ideologically, those who came out with such extremism were religious”.

Rule of law, education, human rights. When Amnon Rubinstein sees a problem in the Israeli society, he feels compelled to fix it. This is why a few months ago, he also came up with a proposal for a new immigration law for a country, like Israel, that for what concerns non-Jewish immigration, has more or less a legal vacuum. His report on immigration, written in cooperation with **Prof. Shlomo Avineri** and **Dr. Liav Orgad** of the

Radzyner School of Law, was presented to the Knesset last month, where it received the support of the Kadima party, and was also presented at a big conference at IDC. “Israel cannot take in the tens of thousands of labour immigrants from Africa. We are a small country and we would soon be overwhelmed. Unlike Europe, all of our borders touch with non-democratic, poor countries. This is the meaning of Liav Orgad's expression 'hard outside, soft inside': not all immigrants should be let in, but once they are here, they should be given complete equal rights. But I am afraid that with this government, the liberal side of our recommendation will not be taken up.”

Amnon Rubinstein is first and foremost a jurist, but the values he stands for go well beyond that. “I believe in values that are extra-judicial, like human liberty and human dignity”.