

## The Racist Legacy of Jose Saramago

By [Amir Afsai](#)

On June 18th, Jose Saramago, internationally acclaimed Portuguese author and 1998 Nobel laureate, died at his residence in the Canary Islands. He was 87 years old. Saramago first rose to prominence in the 1980s owing to the success of the novel *Baltasar and Blimuda*, which explored the struggle of the individual against systems of political and religious authoritarianism. At the Nobel Prize presentation ceremony held in his honor, Saramago was extolled for his unique ability to create “literature characterized at one and the same time by sagacious reflection and by insight into the limitations of sagacity, by the fantastic and by precise realism, by cautious empathy and by critical acuity, by warmth and by irony.”

Saramago’s oeuvre has been translated far and wide. Fourteen of his novels have appeared in Hebrew, with another on its way. In Israel Saramago has established a broad following, particularly among left-leaning intellectuals, who consider him an esteemed literary persona. Ariana Melamed of YNET described him as “one of the most beloved foreign writers in Israel.” Esti Segal of the financial daily *Globes* called him “one of the great authors of our generation.”

Saramago first visited Israel in 1992, around the time the Oslo negotiations were getting started. He toured the Western Wall Tunnel and other sites in Jerusalem and met with then-President Chaim Herzog. There were no symptoms at the time of the hostile attitude toward Jews and Israel that he would develop in later years. Even as late as 2001, Saramago’s *Blindness* was still featured as a component of the literature curriculum in Israeli high schools. When Saramago returned to the region in March 2002, however, it was to visit the town of Ramallah on a solidarity mission with a delegation of the International Parliament of Writers. During a tour of the city, upon seeing the barriers the Israeli army had set up in order to monitor vehicular traffic in and out of the town perimeter, Saramago commented, “It seems to me a bit like the logic of a concentration camp, doesn’t it?” At a press conference later in the visit, Saramago declared, “What is happening in Palestine is a crime which we can put on the same plane as what happened at Auschwitz.”

Comparisons between Israel and the Nazis have become increasingly frequent in recent years, though with some exceptions they remain a calumny resorted to by fringe radicals, not by respected thinkers. For a Nobel Prize winner to descend to such rhetoric is troubling and dismaying, and it demands a closer investigation. Specifically, one must ask what about life in Ramallah evoked in Saramago’s mind images of the Nazi death camps. If Saramago saw Palestinians lined up by the thousands awaiting systematic execution, for example, or bodies of gassed and strafed men, women, children, and elderly stacked in pits or being burned in furnaces, one could say that Saramago’s analogy was valid. If, however, Saramago did not see those things, one must ask what motivation he could have had for invoking an analogy to the Nazi death camps.

At the time of Saramago’s visit in Ramallah, the Second Intifada was peaking. The day after Saramago’s controversial press conference, a Palestinian terrorist from Tulkarm massacred thirty Jews at a Passover Seder in a Netanya hotel. In an effort to contain the escalating wave of Palestinian atrocities, Israel had imposed travel restrictions

in parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. These included closures around some towns, checkpoints on certain highways, and a crackdown on terrorist networks that were flourishing under Yasser Arafat's chairmanship of the Palestinian Authority. There was nothing remotely evocative of the Nazi death camps. As Saramago's colleagues themselves reported, Palestinian college students continued to attend classes, hotels continued to host guests, and children continued to play in the streets. How, then, did Saramago go from travel restrictions to mass murder and genocide? Why did Saramago choose to compare Ramallah to, of all things, Auschwitz?

Saramago's analogy was not an arbitrary one. It was deliberately, premeditatedly drawn. Had he wanted to illustrate suffering on the part of the Palestinians under occupation, he could have selected an apt analogy from any number of historical examples of peoples under occupation. That he chose the analogy he did suggests a more sinister agenda - that of trivializing the horrors perpetrated against Jews during the Holocaust, as well as of depicting the Palestinians as victims of an Israeli genocidal plot. Surely a man of Saramago's stature could appreciate the glaring distortion his analogy constituted. Surely he could not be so insensitive as to insult the collective memory of the Jews by comparing the conditions in Ramallah to those in Auschwitz. Surely he could not be an antisemite.

We are naturally disinclined to confer the label of antisemite on a winner of the Nobel Prize, because an antisemite is someone who embraces primitive stereotypes of Jews, while the Nobel Prize reflects a summit of human achievement. If a provincial Portuguese peasant were to attribute to Jews "an obsessive, psychological and pathologically exclusivist racism" and charge that the Jews "endlessly scratch their own wound to keep it bleeding, to make it incurable, and they show it to the world as if it were a banner," we would be more strongly inclined to deduce that the man was invoking medieval stereotypes of Jews as a deceitful, cunning race and as a people ever conspiring to manipulate the world in their favor. In this case, that Portuguese peasant is Jose Saramago. Beneath the veneer of peace activism and grandfatherly wisdom, Saramago is, like Jimmy Carter and Mairead Corrigan-Maguire before him, a Nobel laureate and an antisemite. That is how he ought to be remembered.

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