
Return from Oz

Amos Oz

The Slopes of the Volcano

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80 pages, Hebrew.

Reviewed by Assaf Sagiv

In 1961, Hannah Arendt was dispatched to Jerusalem by the *New Yorker* to cover the trial of Adolf Eichmann. Her impressions, first published as a series of articles and later collected in the book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, provoked immediate controversy. The dispute focused on Arendt's claim that the prosecution's efforts to portray the accused as a genocidal monster could not be reconciled with his bland, "everyman" persona. Writing that Eichmann was, in fact, an exceedingly average individual, Arendt believed that only his sheer "thoughtlessness" as an obedient bureaucrat in the Nazi machine made him a participant in genocide: "He was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard

III 'to prove a villain.' Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing."

In his new book, *The Slopes of the Volcano*, the revered Israeli author Amos Oz offers a profound rejoinder to Arendt's provocative argument. Many of the spectators at Eichmann's trial, Oz explains, were struck, as was Arendt, by the fact that the accused did not fit the "ancient stereotype of the embodiment of evil," and therefore mistakenly concluded that "before them was not an arch-murderer, but merely a banal bureaucrat." But, insists Oz, "wickedness is banal only in the minds of those naïve and innocent souls for whom it is convenient not to believe in the very existence of evil." In other words, Eichmann may have been a dreary pencil pusher, but that fact in no way mitigates his villainy; so, too, though his character did not fit the hackneyed image of the diabolical fiend, there is nothing banal about someone who played a leading role in one of the most

heinous crimes committed in the history of mankind.

The insistence on calling things by their rightful names and on adhering to the traditional moral categories of good and evil is the common thread running through the three essays that make up *The Slopes*. The essays examine different aspects of Israeli-German relations—a relationship that, explains Oz, is “convoluted, occasionally intimate, difficult and rich.” Yet Oz’s treatment of this charged issue—which many Israeli writers have tackled before—is in truth a pretext for another, more fundamental discussion, concerning the nature of evil today. Indeed, it is in precisely *this* discussion that the real power of the book lies, serving as a bold indictment of the moral confusion that pervades the post-modern world. It is unfortunate, then, that the same discussion also discloses the book’s most egregious weakness: Its ineffective proposals for dealing with the modern world’s moral ailments, and ensuring that an evil the likes of Eichmann never achieves power again.

Two of the book’s three essays are speeches Oz delivered upon receipt of Germany’s prestigious *Die Welt* and Goethe literary prizes—a fact that is liable to cause many Israelis to wrinkle their noses in distaste. Too often, Israeli intellectuals

and artists attempt to curry favor with the “enlightened” upper crust of Paris, Berlin, and London by speaking ill of their country. *The Slopes*, however, makes clear that Oz is innocent of such behavior. Although he is undoubtedly the most esteemed Israeli writer abroad, and certainly in Germany, he makes no effort to flatter European political and moral tastes. In fact, he takes pride in the unflinching and harsh criticism he levels at them.

In the book’s opening essay, Oz recounts his participation in a panel discussion in Germany, hosted by what he calls the “German peace- and reconciliation-mongers.” A woman in the audience asked him if he believes that the German people are guilty to a certain extent of the Palestinian people’s tragedy. Oz admits he was unforgiving in his response:

It was clear to me what they had suggested to her idealistic mind: “Here are those Jews, whose suffering hasn’t cleansed them at all, who come and do to the Palestinians now what the Germans did to them.” The devil tempted me to answer her that yes, in some manner Germany is to blame for the Palestinians’ tragedy, because if the previous generation of Germans had been less negligent and more thorough in its efforts, and if Nazi Germany hadn’t left a few million Jews alive, the Palestinians would have suffered no tragedy.

It seemed that my answer was not welcomed: It was received on stage and in the audience with utter silence, quite a prolonged one, the type of silence that was once called a “deadly silence.”

Oz’s agitation at that “sinister, almost compulsive need to draw comparisons and make analogies or causal connections” between Nazi atrocities and current events in the Middle East sets him apart not only from well-intentioned Europeans, but also from an increasing number of Israeli intellectuals. Indeed, while his opposition to the “occupation,” the Jewish settlement movement, and Israeli policy toward the Palestinians in general has been the driving force behind his public activism over the past several decades, he clearly has not lost a sense of historical and moral proportion. He shuns the discussion of the “affinity between the Holocaust and the tragedy in the Middle East” that is so enthusiastically embraced by many Germans, and only once in *The Slopes* does he hint at a possible connection between these events: The Holocaust, he writes, has left our nation weak even today, and has affected the destinies of the survivors’ descendants, whom he describes as “spiritually wounded.” Oz does not expand on this assertion, nor does he dare associate these spiritual wounds with Israel’s military actions. The only

categorical statement on the subject he is willing to make is that Germany has a special responsibility toward the Jewish nation, one that includes a moral obligation to help Israel should it face annihilation.

Oz is careful not to infer from this moral responsibility that Germans are prohibited from criticizing Israel; nor, for that matter, does he find problematic the use of diplomatic or economic sanctions as a means of expressing disapproval of those policies. Yet he considers the harsh accusations leveled at Israel in Germany today as beyond the pale and indicative of certain pathologies.

For instance, the extreme anti-Israel shift in German public opinion, says Oz, is not the result of ingrained anti-Semitism, but rather the outcome of “old-fashioned sentimentalism, which has always tended to see the world in black and white.” Until the early 1980s, for example, many Germans were inclined toward an exaggerated idealization of Israel, a result of an “emotional convention, bordering on kitsch, according to which all those who are tormented and humiliated rise, as a result of their suffering, to a higher spiritual and moral ground.” Two decades ago, the German infatuation with Israel “gave way to a fury of disappointment, and occasionally even to a feeling that the lover had been deceived and that his

love and devotion had been exploited.” Israel was portrayed, from that time onward, as militant, brutal, and oppressive: “The fervor of sentimental sympathy... was now bestowed on the Palestinians in particular and the Arab states and the Third World in general. And once again it was an emotional and enthusiastic sympathy, unconditional and indiscriminate.”

It is this insistence on distinguishing between justified and unjustified criticism of Israel that defines Oz’s consistent adherence to a moderate leftist stance, one that condemns the wrongs of the “occupation” while at the same time refusing to espouse—unlike the far Left—the scathing anti-Zionist rhetoric prevalent in Europe today. Oz deftly identifies the hidden motives behind this moralistic uproar, which is defined not only by gross over-simplification, but also by a troubling flirtation with anti-Semitism:

If not all the six million were Anne Franks, if the wrongdoings of Israel testify to there being some not-so-nice Jews among the victims, then—how shall we put it—perhaps this allows certain Germans to breathe more easily? Perhaps the enormity of the German crime is fractionally lessened?

At a time when Israeli intellectuals, anxious to be accepted by their right-thinking European colleagues, are

required—and sometimes even volunteer—to help the continent purge its collective guilt, this statement, also published in German, demonstrates a commendable integrity. Oz is unwilling to make a Faustian bargain in order to gain international acceptance. He offers his German audience an opportunity to exhume its painful past—not to bury it.

The moral clarity that typifies Oz’s approach to the Israel-Germany relationship is most evident in his approach to the question of the nature of evil. This question arises almost of its own accord during Oz’s discussion of the Nazi phenomenon, since, in the view of many, it is the definitive test case of our basic moral categories. Oz thus takes the opportunity to clarify once again the validity of these categories, and to counter the intellectual fashions intent on undermining them.

Oz is not concerned about seeming naïve or intellectually passé. His convictions are strong and simply put: “I myself believe that each one of us, at least deep in his heart, is usually capable of distinguishing between good and evil,” he states in the book’s closing essay. “It is very difficult to define what is good, but evil emits such a strong stench that it is unmistakable.”

The brunt of Oz’s criticism is directed at the academics in the social

sciences, who bear, in his view, primary responsibility for the erosion of mankind's moral perceptions. This intellectual worldview, which entered the West during the nineteenth century, has rendered the term "evil" irrelevant, Oz argues. In the psychosocio-behaviorist era, "All men's motives and all their actions are nothing more than the result of circumstance: Nature and nurture, socio-economic reality or a 'construction of identity'—circumstances none of which are within the control of a single person." He continues:

Some social sciences in the modern era are actually a full-scale attempt, the first of its kind, to eliminate both good and evil from the pageant of human existence. For the first time in their long history, both good and evil have been annulled by the idea according to which circumstances are always responsible for our decisions and actions—and they are especially responsible for our sufferings. "Society is to blame for everything." Or maybe it's the political establishment. Or Colonialism. Imperialism. Zionism. Globalization. Whatever.

There will naturally be some who argue that Oz is hopelessly clinging to an outdated, even romantic, notion of Evil, and that he insists on presenting it as a product of free will. This claim may contain a grain of truth: As an artist and writer, Oz

undoubtedly finds the ingenious and self-aware villains of literature, such as Milton's Devil or Shakespeare's Iago, far more interesting than impersonal and disembodied forces such as the "establishment," "society," or "globalization." Nonetheless, Oz's point is an important one. The modern tendency to divert blame from the individual to the circumstances that govern his life has unburdened man of moral responsibility for his actions. More troubling, in a world of purely "passive" actors, programmed and directed by shadowy governments and big business, *everyone* is considered a victim, or at least wishes to be portrayed as such. "Individuals, groups, 'minorities,' nations, and cultures bicker about who is suffering more and therefore who deserves more sympathy or more compensation," laments Oz, who calls this post-modern paradigm "moral kitsch." Evil, he repeats constantly, is real and tangible; as the twentieth century has proved, it has a face, a personality, and a distinct identity. It may assume an enlightened or benevolent appearance, but, in the end, it "emits such a strong stench" that its true character is unmistakable.

Sometimes it seems that this liberal humanist's protest against the new order of things—that is, against the view that has driven the devil into

unemployment—is more the result of nostalgia than of a reasoned and orderly worldview. Certainly he does not offer any original perspective on the matter, nor is his plea for the revival of the old formulas particularly sophisticated. Nonetheless, there is something admirable about his determination that individuals and nations alike must account for their actions, and his refusal to be satisfied with explanations and excuses that have poisoned public discourse. Oz believes wholeheartedly that “The world has good people. The world has evil people.” And unless we acknowledge this elementary fact, we cannot act morally.

In view of Oz’s powerful diagnosis of moral ailments, the treatment he prescribes is disappointingly weak. Having insisted so vehemently on the concreteness of evil, one would expect him to urge his readers to fight it resolutely. Instead, Oz supports a far less spirited approach. “There is an intellectual tradition in Europe that seems alien to me and remote from my way of thinking, even though many people with opinions close to mine subscribe to it,” he writes, explaining that in this tradition, “whoever sees a human disaster, atrocity or bloodshed—hastens to sign a petition and express his shock,

his horror. To protest. To condemn and point an accusing finger. And by doing that he believes he has done his moral duty.” Dismissing this reaction as so much self-indulgence and sanctimony, Oz goes on to propose a calmer, almost pastoral, alternative:

I come from another tradition. If you prefer, I come from the tradition of Jewish culture. If you prefer—you can call it “Doctor Anton Chekhov’s moral legacy”: Should you be at the scene of a serious car crash, or one of violence, your primary duty is not to condemn the driver who caused the accident but to offer your help to the injured. To dress wounds. Or bring water. Or call for help, or at least hold the injured person’s hand.

Oz sums up the main practical points of his position with the following recommendations: “There is a need for moral gentleness and not moral rage. There is a need for compassion and not moralizing. There is a need for a balanced, complex, tolerant, and humorous attitude and not dry, condescending, grumpy over-righteousness.”

Lines like these may leave the Israeli reader somewhat puzzled; after all, the name Amos Oz appears on a considerable number of high-profile petitions, and during his many public appearances on behalf of this or that political cause, he has more than once displayed a bit of that

“dry, condescending, grumpy over-righteousness” he assails here. But there is a deeper issue at stake: Is “moral gentleness” really enough to fix an injured and bleeding world? And can it really contend with the brutal and unrestrained evil that Oz diagnoses so impressively?

Hardly. In fact, Oz himself is probably aware of the limitations of his approach. At one point he recalls the story of relatives liberated from Theresienstadt by heavily armed Red Army soldiers, and admits that “there are situations in which aggression must be crushed by the force of weapons before peace can be set free.” We can only guess at whether those wielding weapons must also be expected to demonstrate the same “balanced, complex, tolerant, and humorous attitude” Oz recommends we embrace so wholeheartedly. World War II teaches us an entirely different lesson. In his excellent study *Why the Allies Won*, the British historian Richard Overy explains that the success of the Allies in defeating the Nazis was largely the result of their perception of the war as a moral crusade in which the enemy must be defeated at any cost. The Allied governments and their media thus encouraged the public to despise the enemy with great intensity: “May holy hatred become our chief, our only feeling,” declared

the Soviet *Pravda* in 1942, and an editorial published around the same time in Britain’s *Daily Express* stated that “You can’t win a war like this without hating your enemy.” Overy concludes:

The conscription of moral energies, like the mobilization of technical and economic resources, was a necessary element in the war effort on both sides, particularly in this war when societies were fighting for their very existence, or thought they were. Like the religious wars of the sixteenth century, the Second World War was fought with a ferocity and desperation born of real fears and deep hatreds.... Moral commitment to the cause was forged from a heady mix of outrage, vengeance, loathing and contempt, an intensity of feeling and a depth of anxiety not experienced since the days of French Revolutionary Europe or the Thirty Years’ War. Populations on both sides sustained the struggle with some sense of the justness of their cause, with that ‘sacred hatred.’

World War II is just one example of a situation in which compassion, empathy, and tolerance may actually do more harm than good. While we might agree with Oz’s objection to the loud self-righteousness exhibited by European intellectuals—especially when it is raised (as it often is) on behalf of the wrong causes—we must surely recognize that moral rage, even

“sacred hatred,” has a powerful, often necessary role to play in the struggle against evil. Even Jewish tradition, in the name of which Oz claims to speak, recognizes this. King Saul, who showed exceptional “moral gentleness” in his treatment of Agag, the king of Amalek, was condemned in both the Bible and rabbinic literature. “He who is merciful to the cruel, will eventually become cruel to the merciful,” Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said of him. In this and many other instances, Judaism demonstrates a very limited—to say the least—tolerance of wickedness. Indeed, it does not shrink from condoning extreme violence if it is necessary to defeat evil. It would seem, therefore, that if it is Amos Oz’s true wish to attach his compassionate ethical doctrine to a religious tradition, he would do better to look elsewhere.

There can be no doubt that Oz is a superb observer of moral failings. Between analysis and action, however, he loses something essential. This may be described, crudely, as “the fighting spirit.” Recent events provide a salient illustration of his peculiar vulnerability: At the commencement of Israel’s military offensive against Hezbollah in July 2006, he was among those few Israeli intellectuals who expressed support for their country’s

actions. Yet the bloody campaign soon proved more than he could stomach, and at a press conference held on August 10, Oz, together with fellow Israeli authors A.B. Yehoshua and David Grossman, called for an immediate cease-fire. He lambasted “radical and militant Islam,” whose murderousness has absolutely nothing to do with the “occupation, its evils, or the settlements,” while maintaining that the goal of defeating the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis is “delusional.” True to his favorite—and constant—political prescription, Oz recommended that we “begin discussing all the unsolved problems between Israel and Lebanon”—as if words alone can vanquish the darkness.

This lack of resoluteness greatly reduces the potency of *The Slopes*, which is unfortunate: One gets the feeling that the author has seen through the illusions that prevent us from making the right moral choices. But in the face of true evil, he is weak at the knees; he either does not want to, or else simply cannot, draw the true practical conclusions from his own analysis.

In explaining his choice of title for the book, Oz suggests we draw a picture in our minds of a small village on the slopes of a volcano about to erupt. “The volcano trembles and shakes all night, emitting smoke and

sparks, growling and grumbling, and every so often rolling down flaming rocks towards the village.” This description, claims Oz, fits Israel’s situation since its founding. But it is also, he explains, “an image of the human situation. For all of us, wherever we are, live on the slopes of an active volcano.” As a writer living in that village, Oz considers his role to be clear: “To stop the bloodshed, to stabilize the condition of the wounded, and to help heal the scars.” But reading Oz’s essays, one can only be of the opinion that his analogy is inadequate, or at least misleading. For Israeli society—and

the West as a whole—is not a village on the slopes of a volcano, but rather a camp surrounded by enemies. Nor will the disaster he wishes to prevent be caused by a force of nature; it will be perpetrated by calculating killers who are arming for battle. In such a situation, the author, like the other members of his community, has only one possible course of action. Not to show “moral gentleness,” nor to engage in futile negotiations, but quite simply, to fight.

Assaf Sagiv is Senior Editor of AZURE.