

# God, Satan and Human\*

By Amos Oz

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5 When I was a child in Jerusalem, our teacher at a Jewish orthodox school taught us the book of Job. All Israeli children, to this day, study the book of Job. Our teacher told us how Satan travelled all the way from that book to the New Testament, and to Goethe's Faust, and to many other works of literature. And although each writer made something new of Satan, the devil, der Teufel,  
10 he was always the very same Satan: cool, amused, sarcastic and sceptical. A deconstructor of human faith, love and hope.

Job's Satan, like Faust's Satan, enters upon a wager. His big prize is neither a hidden treasure, nor the heart of a beautiful woman, and not even a promotion to a higher position in the heavenly hierarchy. No: Satan enters a gamble out  
15 of some kind of didactic urge. He wishes to make a point. To prove something, and to refute something else. With enormous argumentative zeal, the biblical Satan and the Aufklärung Satan try to show God and his angels that man, when given the choice, will always opt for evil. He will choose bad over good, willingly and consciously.

20 Shakespeare's Iago may well have been motivated by a very similar didactic zeal. Indeed, so it is with almost every thorough evildoer in world literature. Perhaps this is why Satan is often so charming. So beguiling. John Milton may have misunderstood the devil when he called him "the infernal serpent". Heinrich Heine knew better when he wrote:

25 I call'd the devil, and he came,  
And with wonder his form did I closely scan;  
He is not ugly, and is not lame,  
But really a handsome and charming man.

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\* Southern Cross Review: <https://southerncrossreview.org/72/oz-evil-god.html>

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A man in the prime of life is the devil,  
Obliging, a man of the world, and civil;  
A diplomatist too, well skill'd in debate,  
He talks quite glibly of church and state.

5 Man and the devil understood each other so well, because they were, in some ways, so alike. In the book of Job, Satan, the perverse educator, intimately understood how human pain breeds evil: "Put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face". And Shakespeare's witches, in Macbeth, could sense the arrival of an evil man from afar: "I feel a pricking  
10 in my thumb; something wicked this way comes." Goethe, for his part, observed that the devil, like so many human beings, is simply a selfish charmer. "Der Teufel ist ein egotist." The devil is an egotist. He only helps others in order to serve his own ends. Not, as God and Kant would have it, for the sake of the good deed alone.

15 And this is why, ever since the book of Job, and until not so long ago, Satan, man and God lived in the same household. All three seemed to know the difference between good and evil. God, man and the devil knew that evil was evil and that good was good. God commanded one option. Satan seduced to try the other. God and Satan played on the same chessboard. Man was their  
20 game-piece. It was as simple as that.

Personally, I believe that every human being, in his or her heart of hearts, is capable of telling good from bad. Even when they pretend not to. We have all eaten from that tree of Eden whose full name is the tree of knowledge of good from evil.

25 The same distinction may apply to truth and lies: just as it is immensely difficult to define the truth, yet quite easy to smell a lie, it may sometimes be hard to define good; but evil has its unmistakable odour: every child knows what pain is. Therefore, each time we deliberately inflict pain on another, we know what we are doing. We are doing evil.

30 But the modern age has changed all that. It has blurred the clear distinction that humanity has made since its early childhood, since the Garden of Eden. Some time in the 19th century, not so long after Goethe died, a new thinking entered western culture that brushed evil aside, indeed denied its very existence. That intellectual innovation was called social science. For the new,  
35 self-confident, exquisitely rational, optimistic, thoroughly scientific practitioners of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and economics - evil

was not an issue. Come to think of it, neither was good. To this very day, certain social scientists simply do not talk about good and evil. To them, all human motives and actions derive from circumstances, which are often beyond personal control. "Demons," said Freud, "do not exist any more than gods do, being only the products of the psychic activity of man." We are controlled by our social background. For about 100 years now, they have been telling us that we are motivated exclusively by economic self-interest, that we are mere products of our ethnic cultures, that we are no more than marionettes of our own subconscious.

10 In other words, the modern social sciences were the first major attempt to kick both good and evil off the human stage. For the first time in their long history, good and bad were both overruled by the idea that circumstances are always responsible for human decisions, human actions and especially human suffering. Society is to blame. Painful childhood is to blame. The political is to blame. Colonialism. Imperialism. Zionism. Globalisation. What not. So began the great world championship of victimhood.

For the first time since the book of Job, the devil found himself out of a job. He could no longer play his ancient game with human minds. Satan was dismissed. This was the modern age.

20 Well, the times may be changing again. Satan might have been sacked, but he did not remain unemployed. The 20th century was the worst arena of cold-blooded evil in human history. The social sciences failed to predict, encounter, or even grasp this modern, highly technologised evil. Very often, this 20th-century evil disguised itself as world reforming, as idealism, as re-educating the masses or "opening their eyes". Totalitarianism was presented as secular redemption for some, at the expense of millions of lives.

Today, having emerged from the evil of totalitarian rule, we have enormous respect for cultures. For diversities. For pluralism. I know some people are willing to kill anyone who is not a pluralist. Satan was hired for work once again by postmodernism; but this time his job is verging on kitsch: a small, secretive bunch of "shady forces" are always guilty of everything, from poverty and discrimination, war and global warming to September 11 and the tsunami. Ordinary people are always innocent. Minorities are never to blame. Victims are, by definition, morally pure. Did you notice that today, the devil never seems to invade any individual person? We have no Fausts any more. According to trendy discourse, evil is a conglomerate. Systems are evil. Governments are bad. Faceless institutions run the world for their own sinister

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gain. Satan is no longer in the details. Individual men and women cannot be "bad", in the ancient sense of the book of Job, or Macbeth, of Iago, of Faust. You and I are always very nice people. The devil is always the establishment. This is, in my view, ethical kitsch.

- 5 Let us consult our own most gifted adviser, der Geheimrat [councillor] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Let us look at his West-Eastern Divan, one of the earliest great tributes of western culture to its own curiosity and attraction to the east. Was Goethe a condescending "orientalist", as Edward Said might have him? Or was he a multiculturalist, in the fashion of today's guilt-ridden  
10 Europeans paying lip service to everything distant, to everything different, everything decisively non-European?

I think Goethe was neither an orientalist nor a multiculturalist. It was not the extreme and imagined exoticism of the east that tempted him, but the strong and fresh substance that eastern cultures, eastern poetry and art may give to  
15 universal human truths and feelings. The good, and indeed God, are universal:

- God is of the east possess'd,  
God is ruler of the west;  
North and South alike, each land  
20 Rests within His gentle hand.

Even more so, love is universal, whether it is for Gretchen or for Zuleika. So a German poet may well write a love poem for an imagined Persian woman. Or for a real Persian woman. And speak the truth. And yet more touchingly, pain is universal. As one of the finest poems in the West-Eastern Divan has it:

- 25 Let me Weep, hemmed-in by night,  
In the boundless desert.  
Camels are resting, likewise their drivers,  
Calculating in silence the Armenian is awake;  
But I, beside him, calculate the miles  
30 That separate me from Zuleika, reiterate  
The annoying bends that prolong journeys.  
Let me weep. It is no shame.  
Weeping men are good.  
Didn't Achilles weep for his Briseis?  
35 Xerxes wept for his unfallen army;  
Over his self-murdered darling  
Alexander wept.

Let me weep. Tears give life to dust.  
 Already it's greening.

Goethe does not recruit the east to prove anything. He takes humans, all humans, seriously. East or west, good men weep.

5 I would like to take a moment here to weep for Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. I would like to weep for Weimar. Because Goethe's Weimar is gone for good. Even Thomas Mann's Weimar is gone and cannot return. Not that Weimar today is not a pretty, well renovated historical town. But Weimar today lies across the forest from Buchenwald.

10 We may lament the passing of memories, the fading of landscape, the growth and change of old towns. But this is not what we are lamenting in Goethe's Weimar. Not the teeth of time, but the extreme and total evil of man, have taken Goethe's Weimar away from us.

Mann, in his novel *Lotte in Weimar*, made Charlotte Kestner, who was once  
 15 Lotte Buff, the real-life beloved of the young Werther, come to visit the old and famous Goethe in Weimar. Lotte in Weimar is an exquisite study in the slow fading of recollection: even when Goethe was still alive, the old Goethe-Zeit was slipping away, becoming the stuff of legend. That is normal; that is the way human life and memory, human homes and streets, flow and ebb as  
 20 history moves on.

But Goethe and his old love Lotte could still walk together to the woodland outside the town of Weimar, and observe the blissful, tranquil scenery of the Thuringian countryside. And maybe they could walk up to the beautiful oak tree there, known for many years to come as Goethe's oak tree. And years went  
 25 by, and generations died, but the oak tree was still standing. Until it was bombed by an allied aircraft toward the end of the second world war. And Weimar became the neighbouring town, the "market town", of death camp Buchenwald.

And so, the German Nazis killed not only their victims, but also the slow ageing innocence of Weimar and Goethe and Lotte. The subtitle of *Lotte in Weimar* is "The Beloved Returns". But the beloved can no longer return. Not  
 30 for evermore.

Which brings me from Lotte Kestner-Buff to another Lotte, Lotte Wreschner, the mother of my son-in-law. She was born in Frankfurt am Main, 174 years

after Goethe and not far from his house. Not for nothing did the name Lotte run in her family: she grew up in a home full of books, shelves upon shelves of German, Jewish and German-Jewish spiritual treasures. Schiller and the Talmud. Heine and Kant. Buber and Hölderlin. All were there. One uncle was  
 5 a rabbi, the other a psychoanalyst. They all knew Goethe's poetry by heart. The Nazis imprisoned her, along with her mother and sister, and sent them to Ravensbrück, where the mother died of typhus and hard labour. She and her sister Margrit were transferred to Theresienstadt. I wish I could tell you that they were liberated from Theresienstadt by peace demonstrators carrying  
 10 placards saying "make love not war". But in fact they were set free not by pacifist idealists but by combat soldiers wearing helmets and carrying machine guns. We Israeli peace activists never forget this fact, even as we struggle against our country's attitude towards the Palestinians, even while we work for a livable, peaceful compromise between Israel and Palestine.

15 Lotte and Margrit Wreschner came home to find all the books waiting, but none of the family. Not a living soul. Margrit Wreschner can bear witness to what all survivors of that mass murder can tell. There are good people in the world. There are evil people in the world. Evil cannot always be repelled by incantations, by demonstrations, by social analysis or by psychoanalysis.  
 20 Sometimes, in the last resort, it has to be confronted by force.

In my view, the ultimate evil in the world is not war itself, but aggression. Aggression is "the mother of all wars". And sometimes aggression has to be repelled by the force of arms before peace can prevail.

Lotte Wreschner settled in Jerusalem. Eventually she became a leader in the  
 25 Israeli civil-rights movement, as well as a deputy mayor of Jerusalem under Teddy Kollek. Her son Eli and my daughter Fania are both civil rights and peace activists, as are my other children Galia and Daniel.

Let me turn back to Goethe, and back to my feelings about Germany. Goethe's Faust reminds us forever that the devil is personal, not impersonal. That the  
 30 devil is putting every individual to the test, which every one of us can pass or fail. That evil is tempting and seducing. That aggression has a potential foothold inside every one of us.

Personal good and evil are not the assets of any religion. They are not necessarily religious terms. The choice whether to inflict pain or not to inflict  
 35 it, to look it in the face or to turn a blind eye to it, to get personally involved in healing pain, like a devoted country doctor, or to make do with organising

angry demonstrations and signing wholesale petitions - this spectrum of choice confronts each one of us several times a day.

Of course, we might occasionally take wrong turns. But even as we take a wrong turn, we still know what we are doing. We know the difference  
5 between good and evil, between inflicting pain and healing, between Goethe and Goebbels. Between Heine and Heydrich. Between Weimar and Buchenwald. Between individual responsibility and collective kitsch.

Let me conclude with one more personal recollection: as a very nationalistic, even chauvinistic, little boy in Jerusalem of the 1940s, I vowed never to set foot  
10 on German soil, never even to buy any German product. The only thing I could not boycott were German books. If you boycott the books, I told myself, you will become a little bit like "them". At first I limited myself to reading the pre-war German literature and the anti-Nazi writers. But later, in the 1960s, I began to read, in Hebrew translations, the works of the post-war generation  
15 of German writers and poets. In particular, the works of the Group 47 writers led by Hans Werner Richter. They made me imagine myself in their place. I'll put it more sharply: they seduced me to imagine myself in their stead, back in the dark years, and just before the dark years, and just after.

Reading these authors, and others, I could no longer go on simply hating  
20 everything German, past, present and future.

I believe that imagining the other is a powerful antidote to fanaticism and hatred. I believe that books that make us imagine the other, may turn us more immune to the ploys of the devil, including the inner devil, the Mephisto of the heart. Thus, Günter Grass and Heinrich Böll, Ingeborg Bachmann and  
25 Uwe Johnson, and in particular my beloved friend Siegfried Lenz, opened for me the door into Germany. They, along with a number of dear personal German friends, made me break my taboos and open my mind, and eventually my heart. They re-introduced me to the healing powers of literature.

30 Imagining the other is not only an aesthetic tool. It is, in my view, also a major moral imperative. And finally, imagining the other - if you promise not to quote this little professional secret - imagining the other is also a deep and very subtle human pleasure.