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Book Review: How to Cure a Fanatic

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Amos Oz, *How to Cure a Fanatic*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006. 267 pp. \$12.95 (cloth).

How to Cure a Fanatic by the internationally acclaimed novelist and peace activist Amos Oz, is a book I took with me on a recent trip to the Balkans. I decided to read the book and write my review in my flat on Gradačacka Street in the Otoka neighborhood of Sarajevo, given the book's topic and the problems that have plagued the people of Bosnia for the past fifteen years.

Although *How to Cure a Fanatic* is a small, thin book (4" x 6" and 104 pages), it is a fascinating one composed of two essays and a 2005 interview with Oz, who has the characteristics of what I call a "hyperintellectual," in part because of his ability and willingness to criticize and support all sides on various issues, and to make people unsettled in their familiar surroundings. These qualities appear limited in the Jewish and Arab intellectual communities. Given the suffering that both sides have experienced and the fact that each has embraced victimhood, both defend their own side and criticize the other for the current crisis. Oz, on the other hand, is driven by a fierce realism, which dictates that no one side is in possession of the whole truth or deserves the right to exist to the exclusion of the other.

The book, which evolved from two essays originally delivered in Germany in 2002, is intended for those who need to make sense of conflicts that are fought not only over land and nationhood, but that are also driven by fanatics, those who are uncompromising, self-righteous, and determined to change others to fit their own world view. Oz focuses on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but there are many other conflicts to which his words apply, including the current situation in the Balkans. Trying to grasp the complexities of the conflict between the Israeli Jews and the Palestinian Arabs is a daunting task for anyone. However, Oz has reduced it to something much more manageable, so that the reader is led to believe that a long-lasting settlement between the two peoples is possible.

In the first essay, "Between Right and Right," Oz makes it clear that it is inappropriate to categorize the two sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as good and bad since this conflict is "a clash between right and right, a clash between one very powerful, deep, and convincing claim, and another very different but no less convincing, no less powerful, no less humane claim" (p. 3). They each have a profound bond to the land, which Oz believes lies at the heart of this conflict. It is not a question of misunderstanding each other; it

is a matter of real estate, about claiming the same country as a national homeland. However, what seems to be an intractable dispute becomes more tractable or resolvable because Oz knows "life" for the Jew and the Arab will ultimately mean "compromise," not surrender.

Oz acknowledges that it will be difficult for both parties to compromise, but recognizes that aggression and war must be replaced with peace. Peace for Oz is not love. He has no expectation that the peoples involved will love each other; thus his expression, "Make Peace Not Love." Rather than focusing on virtues like brotherhood, compassion, and forgiveness, Oz refers to what he regards as more important virtues: justice, common sense, and, most importantly, imagination. Imagination, "a deep ability to imagine the other, sometimes to put ourselves in the skin of the other" (pp. 13–14), is the cornerstone of his approach to resolving the conflict. The unwillingness of the Israeli Jew and Palestinian Arab to engage in imagination, to imagine that the other has historical and emotional links to the same land, that the other has rights as well, is a major stumbling block to any sort of partition solution (the two-state solution) drawn along the 1967 lines. He sees few, if any, visionary leaders on either side to lead the way. Yet Oz fails to understand that imagination does not become an important part of one's arsenal in combating intractability until we as human beings recognize that the other is in a morally untenable situation. Imagination occurs because we can empathize with the other, with his or her moral plight. Only then can we contemplate what it would be like to be the other. Emotion is a key part of the equation.

In the second essay, "How to Cure a Fanatic," Oz focuses on fanaticism and how it can be contained but not cured. His portrayal of the fanatic is unsettling, for it could apply to many people at various times in their lives—whether it be Islamic fundamentalists, environmental activists, or anti-jihadist crusaders. We can all become the fanatic if we take justice, convictions, or faiths to be more important than life. He knows the fanatic well because he was one himself as a child growing up in Jerusalem and throwing rocks at the British. It is when we become "uncompromising and self-righteous," when we lose the capacity to imagine the other and "desire to force other people to change" (p. 57) that we become fanatics. And the crisis in Israel and Palestine is a struggle between fanaticism and pragmatism, pluralism, and tolerance. Although Oz believes that fanaticism is an "ever present component of human nature" (p. 41), he is hopeful that fanaticism can be dealt with in the Middle East and elsewhere. Why? Because he believes that imagi-

nation, even in the form of literature, can partially immunize us from this evil. If we can imagine how our ideas might impact other people, then we might be less inclined to take those ideas seriously. Other remedies against fanaticism include seeing ourselves as others see us and being able to laugh at ourselves, as well as being able to live in “open-ended” situations. In short, the world is contingent insofar as I could have been a fundamentalist, a jihadist, or a crusader; and even though I am not any of the aforementioned, I can change the future so that the world is a better place in which to live. No one is a fanatic out of necessity. We can all imagine a world with fewer fanatics, which is the first step to actually living in such a world.

The book concludes with an interview, “The Order of the Teaspoon,” that was conducted in September 2005. (The German edition, *Wie man Fanatiker kuriert*, does not have the same set of essays as the English edition; it does not include the interview, but it does include an interesting essay by the Palestinian writer Izzat al-Ghazzawi.) It is here that Oz takes up the importance of civil society and a Marshall Plan for democracy-building in the Middle East.

The role that Oz finds himself taking up, however, is the construction or the reconstruction of person-to-person relationships. It is here that those remedies against fanaticism are utilized, especially the use of imagination, which he regards as a “moral imperative.” And if he is correct in his assessment, then imagination will lead to the creation of better neighbors. And better neighbors mean peace.

Some say that Oz is unrealistic and idealistic about the remedies and the road to peace that he maps out. Perhaps the reason for this view is that his road to peace is in some ways simple. At its heart is the improvement of interpersonal relationships between Jew and Arab. It would have been interesting had Oz explained his approach in greater detail. But this splendid little book casts the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its resolution in more hopeful terms. It ends with his story of the Order of the Teaspoon, an invitation to engage in the conflict’s resolution: “Bring a bucket of water and throw it on the fire, and if you don’t have a bucket, bring a glass, and if you don’t have a glass, use a teaspoon—everyone has a teaspoon. And yes, I know a teaspoon is little and the fire is huge, but there are millions of us and each one of us has a teaspoon” (p. 94).