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## POLITICAL ESCAPISM IN CONTEMPORARY ISRAEL: LESSONS FROM DAVID GROSSMAN'S *TO THE END OF THE LAND*

*This article discusses escapist tendencies identified in contemporary Israel and, based on David Grossman's 2010 novel To the End of the Land (published in Hebrew in 2008), raises the question of whether these tendencies may be associated with the construction of a new narrative for Israeli society.*

### 1. Introduction

In an article, “Evolution of Escape Behavior Diversity,” published in *The American Naturalist*, two zoologists discuss the following symmetry in the evolutionary process: “Natural selection favors predator efficiency in finding and capturing prey and, simultaneously, prey adeptness at avoiding or escaping predators” (Schall and Pianka 1980, 551). This is a reminder of the importance of escape in the evolutionary process; the prey escaping its predator uses a strategy of survival. In observing the natural world, we distinguish between an effective and ineffective escape by the prey's success at avoiding a predator. But in nature we do not find escapism, namely, an escape strategy that is seen a priori as ineffective, as in the myth of the ostrich burying its head in the sand in view of a predator.

“Escapism,” defined as a conscious attempt to find relief from reality, is a cultural phenomenon (Evans 2001). It refers to an escape that is seen as utterly ineffective, even by the escapee himself or herself, as in the case of Madame Bovary's coping with her miserable life in 19th-century France by escaping into a world of fantasy, and subsequently into suicide. The boundaries between “escape” and “escapism,” however, are not always clear, as the effectiveness of an escape strategy cannot always be determined a priori. What seems like a relief from reality may turn out to be a means of survival.

What, then, accounts for the difference between escape and escapism on the cultural plain? The effectiveness of an escape on that plane, I would like to suggest, can be measured by the degree to which the escapee is able to construct a new narrative that changes the prey–predator relationship. This is why Emma Bovary, who failed to construct such a narrative, became a symbol of escapism, while the retreat of British and French forces from Dunkirk in May 1940, for example, is often viewed as an effective escape. This view stems from the rewrite of the war's narrative in Dunkirk, reflected in Churchill's words in the House of Commons (as quoted on the Churchill

Centre and Museum website, <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/learn/speeches/speeches-of-winston-churchill/128-we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches>): “We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.” The power such narrative change may have on individuals and groups has been noted by Bruner (2004, 708), who wrote that “the ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing that go with them become so habitual that they finally become receipts for structuring experience itself.” In this article, I would like to discuss escapist tendencies identified in contemporary Israel and raise the question of whether these tendencies may be associated with the construction of a new narrative for Israeli society. I shall use David Grossman’s *To the End of the Land* (Grossman 2010), originally published in Hebrew in 2008 and entitled *Isha borahat mibSORA* (literally “a woman fleeing the tidings”), a thought-provoking novel on the Israeli condition, to explore whether these tendencies represent escapism or rather an escape from a state of hopelessness into a new political phase, especially regarding the relations between Israel and the Palestinians.

## 2. Political escapism in Israel

In a seminal article published in *Psychology Review*, psychologist Roy Baumeister (1990) offers the theoretical foundations of escapism by proposing six steps an escapee would go through on the road to suicide: the realization that current outcomes or circumstances fall far below expectations; self-blame over that dissonance; awareness of oneself as inadequate, incompetent, unattractive, or guilty; negative affect; an attempt to escape from meaningful thought into a relatively numb state of cognitive deconstruction (and the use of increasingly strong means of terminating the aversive thoughts and feelings when the attempt is unsuccessful); and finally a reduction of inhibitions, which may lead to suicide.

Although this theoretical construct relates to individuals, it is partly applicable to whole societies, including contemporary Israel. In 1973, Israel suffered a major trauma when it was taken by surprise and barely contained an attack by its neighbouring countries, Egypt and Syria. The dissonance between the expectations that the new territories Israel acquired in the Six-Day War of 1967 would grant it security and the vulnerable position it found itself in during the Yom Kippur War of 1973 led to severe self-blame, especially over the hubris that prevented its political leadership from exploiting opportunities to reach a peace agreement with its neighbours before the war.

Writings by Israeli public intellectuals after 1973 were marked by self-flagellation and endless guilt, which has become a mark of the public discourse in the country. That discourse became increasingly confrontational and, due to the more-or-less equal size of the adversary camps—one advocating concessions to the Palestinians, the other opposing such concessions—it moved in circles and never went beyond a deluge of words over the status of the occupied territories, which has not substantially changed for decades. Gradually, Israel has fallen into a state of numbness. For example, election campaigns were often dull as a result of the two camps balancing each other out and a large chunk of the electorate losing interest in politics. So-called “centrist” parties came to power with no clear agenda, from the Dash party in 1977 to the Yesh Atid party

in 2013. Thus, Israel was seen by many as an escapist society, one that tries—unsuccessfully—to escape its many problems by ignoring them.

For example, in “Escape from Politics,” Yishai (2012) suggests that escape is not manifested in what people think or how they feel, but in what they do regarding civic life. She proposes four venues of escapism: remaining secluded from the political world, concentrating instead on personal wellbeing; voting for political parties claiming to be apolitical; replacing political activity with voluntary civic work; and rejecting the democratic rules of the game. Yishai is mainly concerned with the effects of these venues of escapism on democracy. Apathy, she writes, threatens legitimacy; escapist partisanship undermines the proper conduct of parliamentary politics; reliance on voluntary work can reduce government’s accountability; and rejection of the rules of the game may threaten the very existence of the state.

Yishai identifies all four forms of escapism in Israel, claiming that they nourish each other:

Indicators of voter turnout, party affiliation, and protests reveal a growing sense of apathy. Escapist parties have become ubiquitous in Israeli democracy. Reliance on the third sector to solve social problems has increased in recent years. NGOs not only supplement politics but actually substitute for authoritative allocation of essential goods, such as shelter and food. Challenge to the rule of law is manifested by political violence and disobedience, motivated by anti-democratic ideology. (Yishai 2012, 290)

In “Escapist Parties in Israeli Politics,” Susser and Goldberg (2005, 636) define escapism as the shying away from weighty and challenging problems. Escapists turn to issues that are “more amenable to their will, more emotionally satisfying, less demanding of mental and physical energies – at times even to concerns that are insubstantial, even capricious.” And while escapist behaviour seems unlikely in Israel due to its security concerns, ideological fervour, and life and death reality, the authors point to the existence of escapist political parties, which, they claim, have been an almost permanent fixture of Israeli public life over the past 40 years. They analyse 10 Israeli “ideologically unfocused” parties marketing “bizarre, eccentric, personalized and ‘non-political’ agendas to alienated voters” (Susser and Goldberg 2005, 637), and describe Israel’s escapist parties:

Their answers to political dilemmas tend to be sensational, uncomplicated and ethically charged. They promise quick results and dramatic successes. They display a low threshold for political ambiguities [...] Significantly, these parties do not present clear policies regarding the central issues of Israeli politics: war and peace, the Palestine-Israel conflict, territories, settlements, negotiations, etc. Indeed, these issues tend to be sidestepped. At times they are expressly set aside with the claim that, in any case, they are irresolvable. (Susser and Goldberg 2005, 637)

Since the publication of the above article, which surveys the escapist behaviour of political parties beginning in 1977, the phenomenon has become even more salient, most notably in the parliamentary elections of January 2013, when a large number of Israeli citizens cast their vote for Yesh Atid (Hebrew for “there is a future”), a political party

headed by a TV presenter whose political positions were all but blurred. The vote for this party represented to many the tendency to avoid hard but necessary political decisions and actions, especially regarding the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Various commentators have referred to that tendency before and after the elections. In 2012, Mark Leonard, director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, wrote that Israel under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was indulging in a form of triple escapism. (1) Security: believing that somehow Israel can achieve security first, and only afterwards deal with the unresolved political issues that are the cause of insecurity and resistance. (2) Geopolitical: dismissing the solidarity of new leaders for the Palestinians as rhetoric that will not come to anything. (3) Economic: accepting the “start-up nation” myth created by the governing elite of Israel, which in practice means that it is economics rather than the peace process that takes centre stage (Leonard 2012). Many commentators raised an eyebrow over the fact that, in the 2013 elections, the occupation hardly featured as an election issue, not even as a minor preoccupation (Diab 2013).

The question is whether these escapist tendencies can lead to the construction of a new narrative for Israeli society. Are these tendencies a form of escape or of escapism; in other words, can they lead to narrative change that may be seen as enhancing security and peace in the country? Was the 2013 vote for Yesh Atid sheer escapism or rather an escape from a state of hopelessness into a new political phase, as claimed in Yesh Atid’s slogans? A preliminary answer to these questions can be found in Grossman’s *To the End of the Land*, the story of Ora, a mother who sends her younger son Ofer off to battle and escapes to the Israel National Trail (INT), a 1000-kilometre set of hiking trails crossing the country from north to south, in order to avoid the notification of his death.

This is a clear case of escapism, reminiscent of hopeless attempts to escape one’s fate in ancient Greek tragedies. As in those tragedies, Ora knows the announcement will come, but decides to go on the trail nevertheless. As the author puts it:

if she runs away from home, then the deal – this is how she thinks of it now – will be postponed a little, at least for a short while. The deal that the army and the war and the state may try to impose upon her very soon, maybe even tonight. The arbitrary deal that dictates that she, Ora, agrees to receive notification of her son’s death, thereby helping them bring the complicated and burdensome process of his death to its orderly, normative conclusion. (Grossman 2010, 105)

Although Grossman’s protagonist calls her escape “a meagre and pathetic sort of protest” (Grossman 2010, 105), her journey may be seen as a search by the author for a different narrative for Israeli society, a search for a new story in which the protest by a mother who refuses to the above “deal” is considered a means of survival, while the existential state in which parents are waiting for the notification of their children’s death in war becomes “meagre and pathetic.” How successful is this search?

### 3. The novel and reality

Before attempting to answer the above question on the basis of the literary text, a few words on the legitimacy of doing so are in order. A novel is no substitute for an observation of political or cultural reality. As literary scholars often insist, “literature

departments are *literature* departments, and not adjuncts to political science or cultural anthropology” (Searle 2006, 1254). Literature, it is argued, should not be reduced to ideas or morals. Waters (2005), for example, objects to the widespread focus on an author’s or reader’s intention or ideology. As a result, he claims, literary critics are devoted to saving the world, not to saving literature for the world. Even literature that raises strong political feelings should not be turned into a political manifesto, adds Taras (2013, 189):

A political manifesto masking as a literary work is not a reliable narrative because it lacks the aesthetic qualities that entangle and entrap the reader. It is the aesthetic qualities that draw the reader into the complex, conflicting reality in which history encounters multiple branching points along which it may travel.

Occasionally, however, a novel read for its aesthetic value may generate ideas of significance in the public sphere. This point was recognized by Auerbach (1953, 19) in his celebrated *Mimesis*, in which he distinguished between the straightforward narration of Homer’s myths and the Old Testament writing of history as a godly plan, the latter leaving out elements of time, place, human motive, and the like, which, however, makes it no less realistic. In other words, a work of literature need not be structured as a description of reality in order to enrich our understanding of the political and cultural world surrounding us. This was clearly felt by literary critics and scholars when Grossman’s novel came out. So much so that on 26 May 2008, Menachem Peri, the book’s editor, posted a personal column on the publishing house’s website (<http://www.newlibrary.co.il/article?c0=14221>), in which he expressed his concern over the unprecedented response by tens of thousands of readers using superlatives to express their enthusiasm about the “book’s intent,” interpreted in accordance with their own narrow perspective. He rightly suggested that the novel be subjected to a variety of perspectives to enrich the reading experience.

The superlatives, however, kept appearing in literary supplements, newspaper articles, and blogs. The novel was granted iconic stature and has been seen by many as the founding novel of Hebrew literature in the 21st century (Melamed 2008). This is not obvious for a 630-page novel which many readers found rather tedious. The novel begins with long dialogues between three youngsters, two boys and a girl, hospitalized in the same darkened ward during the Six-Day War of 1967. The three—Ilan, Avram and Ora—form a three-way bond of mythological proportions.

Ora marries Ilan and gives birth to her older son, Adam, while her younger son, Ofer, is fathered by Avram, who has never met him. Ilan and Avram’s bond never unravels, even after Avram withdraws from the world as a result of his traumatic experience as a POW in Egypt during the 1973 war; the love between Ilan and Ora is also unaffected by their separation. Early in the plot, Ilan and Adam are travelling together in South America while Ofer is called to military service. He is summoned to take part in a major military offensive and Ora calls Sami, an Arab taxi owner and family friend, to drive her and her son to the army drop-off point. After sending Ofer off, she asks Sami to drive her to “where the country ends” (Grossman 2010, 149). She escapes to the INT, dragging Avram along, and as the two lovers walk the trail across hundreds of kilometres and hundreds of pages, the life story of one contemporary Israeli family unfolds.

The enthusiastic acceptance of the novel seems to have stemmed from the feeling that the author has touched deep into Israeli life. Alter (2010) defined *To the End of the Land* as the definitive novel of the present Israeli condition. He writes:

There are three major Hebrew novels that record the anguished way-stations of the Zionist experience: S.Y. Agnon's *Only Yesterday*, a masterpiece published in 1945, which deals with the early settlers in the first decade of the twentieth century, when he himself came to Palestine; S. Yizhar's vast stream-of-consciousness novel *The Days of Ziklag*, which appeared in 1958, and focuses on the Israeli War of Independence; and David Grossman's *To the End of the Land* (the original title in Hebrew was *A Woman Fleeing the News*), which [ ... ] engages the condition of living in Israel in the era of terrorism and the occupation. (Alter 2010, 37)

To Alter, the novel is about a condition of terrorism and occupation. Others interpreted it as an attempt to throw in the readers' faces the price of their silence about the wars dictated to them from above, or as a prophecy of destruction in the tradition of Jewish martyrdom. The various interpretations reflect a common tendency to blur the distinction between the novel's fictional tale and the author and to read it as a representation of Grossman's position as a major spokesman for the Israeli Left. Grossman published *Sleeping on a Wire* (1993) and *The Yellow Wind* (2002), two works of non-fiction composed of interviews, in which he forcefully reflected the agony of Palestinian Arabs in Israel and in the occupied territories. Moreover, the tragic coincidence in which Grossman's son Uri was killed in an Israeli offensive in Lebanon in 2006, shortly before the completion of the novel, further blurred the distinction between the author and his fiction. As Rose (2010) notes, the novel "will never be read now without that knowledge, without that unspeakable pain, which is in danger of conferring on the book a mythical status." She adds, however, that "we do the novel, and Grossman, no favours if we turn it into a sacred object, beyond critical scrutiny and outside the reach of the history to which it so complexly and sometimes disturbingly relates" (Rose 2010).

This valuable advice has largely been ignored. One literary scholar (Gluzman 2008) went as far as to suggest that, although Grossman began writing the novel five years before his personal tragedy occurred, it is inevitably read on the background of Uri's death in the controversial Lebanon war. This event, he wrote, endowed the text with historical and biographical validity; the fictional plot has been penetrated by reality. The conversation about the book, he contended, has now shifted from the literary supplements to the politics and current affairs sections of the newspapers. To him, the book has become a statement on the Israeli soul, its fears, loves, blindness, racist tendencies, and unsolved ethical conflicts. Other reviewers concurred, writing that "David Grossman has mapped the genome of his beloved, tragic land" (Archbold 2010) and that he has "nationalized motherhood" (Balaban 2008).

By discussing the question posed previously, how successful Ora's escape is, we must remain within the realm of fiction; there is no reason to turn the author's protagonist into a representation of his own personal tragedy and his novel into a political manifesto. At the same time, it is the mark of great fiction that it enriches our thinking about the world we live in. Grossman's novel is clearly worth exploring for the light it sheds on contemporary Israel. Let me thus propose a reading of Ora's story in an attempt to

derive from the fictional tale insights on the chances of an Israeli mother escaping to the end of the land to generate a new narrative for her and her country.

#### 4. Escapism on the INT

By placing his protagonist on the INT, Grossman brings us back to where the Israeli story began and where an alternative story may be sought. As geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1998, 9–10) has written,

In telling a human story, we may start at any point in time, but if we go back far enough we necessarily have nature, untouched nature, as stage: first the swamp, forest, bush, or desert, then . . . then what? Then humans enter and our story begins.

The story of modern Israel begins with the Zionist effort to dry swamps, plant forests, and make the desert bloom. As noted by Jonathan Klingler, “The early Zionists were in love with the land, literally the soil and the rocks of Israel. Connecting with the land was a central theme of Zionist ideology” (quoted in Rabbi Jonathan Levshalem’s blog: <http://www.wjcsul.org/blog—hiking-the-israel-trail>). Zionist education in schools and youth movements put special emphasis on hiking and Israel’s pre-state units, especially Palmach (a unit formed during the Second World War), were known for their long hikes on the land, which, to quote sociologist Oz Almog (2000, 177), “were a tool for creating drama and a sense of adventure, danger, suspense, and romanticism.” Walking the land and sleeping in the open, writes Almog, “symbolized the unmediated contact with the soil of the Land of Israel and a direct connection with its landscape.” Today, thousands of hikers walk the INT, or parts of it, every year.

In Grossman’s novel, escape can be found everywhere. All people walking the INT are in search of relief from a heavy burden: “They gave off a forlorn whiff of the persecuted, and disaster hovered over them” (Grossman 2010, 315). Avram, for one, is the ultimate escapee. He runs away, we learn, “from the bad news that is life itself” (Grossman 2010, 319). Throughout the journey he expresses hallucinatory visions for the State of Israel, such as the following:

The museums will take their pictures and statues out of the galleries and warehouses. All the works of art[ . . . ]In the squares, in the tiniest alleys, on the beach, in the zoos, everywhere you look there’ll be some work of art, doesn’t matter what, a kind of massive democracy of beauty. (Grossman 2010, 569)

As the two lovers go on their journey, they meet a handful of characters, all of whom are in a mode of escape. The novel proposes many forms of escape which may be classified by the degree to which they involve activity or inactivity and the degree to which they affect the personal or the public domain. A few examples follow.

##### Personal, inactive

*Escape into sleep:* His legs were already melting away. Soon another exhausting shift of awakeness would be over, and he’d be rid of himself for five or six hours. (Grossman 2010, 138)

*Escape into dreams:* An utterly white dream. Everything in it was white, the streets and the houses and the trees and the cats and dogs and the rock at the edge of the cliff. (Grossman 2010, 4)

*Escape into fiction:* Avram liked horribly long epics: about a world in which all human beings are children in the morning, adults at noon, elderly in the evening, and back again. And there was a serial play that described a world where humans only communicate honestly and openly in their sleep, through dreams, and know nothing about it when they awake. (Grossman 2010, 276)

#### Personal, active

*Escape into play:* In the sketches he wrote and recorded at home on his reel-to-reel, in which he played all the parts – children and old men and women and ghosts and kings and wild geese and talking kettles and any number of other characters. (Grossman 2010, 11)

*Escape into the kitchen:* At seven-thirty that evening she stands cooking in the kitchen, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, and, for lyric effect, the floral apron of a real, hardworking, eager housewife; A chef. Piping-hot pots and pans dance on the stove top, steam curls up to the ceiling and thickens into aromatic clouds, and Ora suddenly knows that everything will work out. (Grossman 2010, 75–76)

*Escape into hyperactivity:* Suddenly she lunged at the ground and started to dig with her hands, pulling out clods of earth and stones, uprooting plants. (Grossman 2010, 177)

#### Public, inactive

*Escape into a new-age mode:* They roam in packs. The beaches of Sinai, Nitzanim, the Judean Desert, ashram in India, music festivals with drugs and free love in France, Spain, and the Negev. (Grossman 2010, 474)

#### Public, active

*Escape into religious ecstasy:* At the head of the small procession walked a tall, skinny, bearded young man. Locks of black hair hung in his face, and a large colourful yarmulke covered his head. He danced and flung his limbs around in excitement as he sang and cheered, and ten or so men and women straggled behind him, hand in hand, zigzagging and daydreaming, mumbling his song or some feeble melody. Every so often they waved a tired foot, collapsed, bumped into each other. (Grossman 2010, 184)

These categories are, of course, fluid. An escape into religious ecstasy may be seen as as inactive as the escape into a new-age mode, but in Israel, as is well known, religious aspirations—commonly seen as a form of escapism—have turned into a force of substantial efficacy in the political arena. Also, escapist behaviours on the individual level, such as the tendency to focus on domestic affairs on account of public affairs, may have a substantial effect on voting behaviour. However that may be, the question



is whether any of the escapist trends identified in Grossman's novel may lead to a new narrative for Israel that could be considered effective from an "evolutionary" perspective; that is, one that contributes to the state's security, peace, and quality of life.

## 5. The failure to construct a new narrative

The author's answer is no! As his protagonists are taken to the starting point, to the heart and root of Israeli culture, they do not find the foundations on which a new story can be composed, for four main reasons.

### *The culture of bereavement*

With over 20,000 Israeli soldiers killed since the establishment of the state in 1948, a culture of bereavement has evolved in the country. In the first few decades, that culture was created and guided by the state, which initiated commemoration ceremonies, erected monuments, legislated a Day of Remembrance Law, and insisted on standardized tombstones for fallen soldiers. In the 1980s, families stepped in and began to play a greater role in the commemoration of their loved ones, which resulted in what Doron and Lebel (2004, 201) call "the politicization of bereavement;" namely the promotion of opposite political views by what they also call "practitioners of ideological bereavement" (Doron and Lebel 2004, 202). Whether it was part of the state efforts or the initiative of families, the culture of bereavement uttered in political rhetoric, the mass media, and plaques of memory all over the country has become a dominant component of Israeli culture. So much so that the two protagonists cannot escape it, however hard they try to.

Above the mountains, above the human tumult, a large eagle glides against the blue sky, floating on a warm, transparent air column that rises up from the valley. Avram and Ora take pleasure in its flight [...] until Ora notices a plaque in memory of Sergeant Roi Dror, of blessed memory, who was killed below this cliff on June 18, 2002 [...] Without a word, they get up and flee to the opposite end of the mountaintop, but there is another monument in their new place of refuge, in memory of Staff Sergeant Zohar Mintz, killed in '96 in Southern Lebanon. (Grossman 2010, 480)

Plaques such as the above are reminders of the ultimate sacrifice made by individuals for the national cause, and are often interpreted as signalling the nation's obligation to respect the heritage of the fallen by continuing the struggle they gave their lives for. In recent years, attempts were made to construct an alternative narrative as part of the culture of bereavement by the formation of Israeli and Palestinian bereaved mothers' associations for peace. Such a cultural shift, however, requires a long, active, continuous effort; bereavement cannot just be escaped nor can the national bond it inspires, for, as Grossman shows in this novel, it is present everywhere.

### *The failure of coexistence*

Contrary to the widespread argument that the early Jewish settlers in Palestine had no interest in the residents of the land, whether Arabs or Orthodox Jews, Israelis have

always been concerned with indigenous life in the country. Early settlers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries adopted many of the customs of rural Arabs, such as dress, food, and linguistic forms; Israel's pre-state youth movements attempted to imitate Arab ways of life; and Israeli writers such as S. Yizhar, A. B. Yehoshua, and others have been preoccupied with questions of coexistence between Jews and Arabs, both before and after the establishment of the state. The lasting wars in the Middle East, however, have taken their toll. One hundred years of bloodshed gave rise to hatred and intolerance, and the presence of peace movements in Israel has not prevented the development of militant attitudes in the country.

Grossman articulates in this novel his disenchantment over the two sides' failure to reach understanding in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Part of the novel is devoted to the relations between Ora and Sami, a taxi driver and long-time friend. Sami is a resident of Abu-Gosh, a peaceful, prosperous, Christian Arab village near Jerusalem, which is often seen as a symbol of coexistence between Jews and Arabs. Ora is aware of his delicate status as a Palestinian Arab in Israel and admires his gentleness in handling every situation in which this comes to bear, as when he drives Ora to the airport and is detained for half an hour by police at the checkpoint.

The relations between Ora and Sami represent coexistence between two reasonable people. Although Ora had completely cut herself off from the “situation” years ago, the two are drawn again and again into political conversations, keenly discussing the latest developments. These conversations, like the discourse in the country as a whole, produce nothing new as nobody had, to use Grossman's words, “a single unused claim left in this eternal debate” (Grossman 2010, 59), but they leave Ora feeling optimistic about the Israeli-Palestinian future.

[W]hen Sami used his Arabesque Hebrew to undermine the long winded, indignant, greedy pretenses of both Jews and Arabs, when he skewered the leaders of both peoples on a sharp Arab saying that often aroused from the depths of her memory the equivalent idiom in her father's Yiddish, she sometimes experienced a subtle latency, as if in the course of talking with him she suddenly discovered that the end, the end of the whole big story, must be good. (Grossman 2010, 59–60)

But Ora and Sami's friendship falls prey to the Middle East conflicts. The two individuals, gentle and reasonable as they are, cannot ignore the fact that they belong to two camps fighting each other. This is vividly illustrated when Ora, absentminded on the day she sends her son off to war, becomes oblivious to Sami's sensitivities. When he hurries to open the taxi door for her he suddenly sees Ofer, whom he had known since he was born, coming down the steps from the house wearing his uniform and carrying his rifle on his way to fight the driver's brethren. The scene in which the three of them sit quietly in the car leaves no illusion about the prospects of coexistence between Jews and Arabs under the present circumstances.

When she escapes to the INT, Ora continues to seek coexistence. In the following paragraph, she affirms her conviction that the land belongs to two peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, but she also realizes how difficult it is to reach coexistence in view of a culture increasingly contaminated by militaristic language.

“Listen,” Ora says and holds his hand.

“To what?”

“To the path. I’m telling you, paths in Israel have a sound I haven’t heard anywhere else” [...]

“Do you mean these paths speak Hebrew? Are you saying *language springth out of the earth*?” [...]

“I wonder what it’s like in Arabic,” she says, “After all, it’s their landscape too [...] Do you still remember the Arabic words you learned for all those thistles and nettles, or didn’t they teach you that in Intelligence?”

Avram laughs. “Mostly they taught us about tanks and planes and munitions, for some reason they didn’t get around to nettles.”

“A grave mistake,” Ora decrees. (Grossman 2010, 492)

### *The geopolitical setting*

Grossman does not allow his readers to forget that whatever new story one tries to compose, the geopolitical environment in which the Israeli–Palestinian story unfolds is not conducive to a narrative of peace.

A flock of partridges alights with beating wings from within the nearby thicket, and the bitch emerges, disappointed.

“And in those moments,” Ora says through her hat, “I always think: This is my country, and I really don’t have anywhere else to go...But at the same time I also know that this country doesn’t really have a chance. It just doesn’t...”

What do you tell a six-year-old boy, a pip-squeak Ofer, who one morning, while you are taking him to school, holds you tight on the bike and asks in a cautious voice, ‘Mommy, who’s against us?’...And of course you want to keep his world innocent and free of hatred, and you tell him that those who are against us don’t always hate us, and that we just have a long argument with some of the countries around us about all sorts of things, just like children in school sometimes have arguments and even fights. But his little hands tighten around your stomach, and he demands the names of the countries that are against us.” (Grossman 2010, 420–421)

The list of those countries is endless. No wonder that when the little boy is helped out of his bike seat, he feels heavier than ever.

### *The curse of occupation*

The worst barrier to a new narrative is the occupation of millions of Palestinians living in the territories conquered by Israel in 1967. As claimed before, the debate over the occupation has dominated Israeli politics over four decades and divided the country between those calling for immediate removal of the occupation as a way to avoid the destruction of the state and those suggesting the occupation is used as a pretext by an Arab world refusing to recognize Israel’s existence within any borders, including those set by the United Nations in the Partition Resolution of November 1947, which divided the land between Jews and Arabs.

Wherever one stands on these issues and whatever the outcome of the endless debates may be, Grossman shows in *To the End of the Land* how deeply the occupation has already penetrated Israeli life. The discourse in Ora's home is so affected by the occupation that one wonders whether her escape to the end of the land can free her from its consequences. It is difficult for the reader to imagine the emergence of a new narrative beyond the tale of occupation, for Ora finds that her own son Ofer has internalized the role of a soldier in the occupied Palestinian territories. As the following paragraph demonstrates, this role has become an unavoidable mark on Ofer and the society he belongs to:

A long time ago, at the beginning of Ofer's service in the Territories [...] she heard a strange sound from the steps that led from the back garden down to the path. She followed the sound to the edge of the garden and saw Ofer sitting there, wearing shorts and an army shirt – he was on leave – carving a beautiful stick with his penknife [...] He smiles. "It's a club. Club meet Mom. Mom, meet club." (Grossman 2010, 502)

## 6. Conclusion

"Escapism" is a conscious attempt to find relief from reality. In this article, I raised the possibility that the relief from reality may turn out to be effective from an evolutionary perspective. It is hard to determine a priori when an escape is effective and when it is not. Whether or not an act like Ora's journey to the end of the land in Grossman's novel is an escape or a form of escapism is open to interpretation. At the same time, the possibility that escapism may be functional under certain conditions is worth exploring. Although psychologists concerned with escape have largely focused on suicide, it must be remembered that suicide represents an extreme case of escape, while humans mostly adhere to the rules of evolution, not of death.

In my attempt to differentiate between escapism and escape on the cultural plain, I have suggested a measure of effectiveness based on the capacity to create an alternative narrative. I have also argued that Grossman's Ora failed to do so by escaping to the INT. This failure may be seen as a comment on political escapism in Israel; that is, on the failure of Israeli society as a whole to come up with an alternative story of its relations with the Palestinians.

Israel avoids the ideological choice between the option of abandoning the occupied territories and the option of annexing them, and the electorate continuously votes into power "centrist" parties characterized by indecision. The 19 parliamentary seats given in the 2013 elections to Yair Lapid, a TV presenter with no clear political agenda, can largely be seen as stemming from disenchantment over the four-decade political deadlock in the country and a will to escape. Following the elections, *Ha'aretz* columnist Levy (2013) made this point explicit:

Israel made a decisive statement regarding what it wants: it wants nothing, only to be left alone. Voters want a quiet, good life, peaceful and bourgeois, and to hell with all those pesky nagging issues. Lapid epitomizes this attitude, being the role model for the all-Israeli dream. He looks good and dresses well, he's well-spoken and well-married, lives in the right neighborhood and drives the right kind of Jeep. With that, he doesn't say much. He's not an extremist, heaven forbid, that's not who

we are, nor does he stick his hand in the fire, that's not us either. He stays away from any divisive issues, just as Israelis prefer [...] Israel affirmed escapism.

Grossman's novel provides an explanation of that phenomenon and points to its consequences. The four themes the author raises as his protagonists are trying to escape from their fate in contemporary Israel—the ever-present bereavement, the difficulty of achieving coexistence between the two claimants of the land, the geopolitical conditions and the curse of occupation—hinder the formation of a new narrative. Contemporary Israel thus finds itself in a hopeless condition. That hopelessness stems not from the prospects of war, death, and destruction (which are often simply ignored), but from the little promise held even by an escape to the INT.

The INT represents everything Israelis hoping to escape the present political setting may be missing. It is where one can be immersed in nature, indulge in nostalgia over lost dreams, and engage in the reconstruction of new dreams about a peaceful, flourishing Israel. As one commentator puts it, the INT may be seen as a physical representation of ideological innocence (Shemesh 2008). But the memories of the past overshadow all visions for the future.

In the first two decades of Israel's existence, odes to peace were sung that envisioned peace in glowing terms, and described the day it will break out as one of swords beaten into plowshares. Since the occupation of 1967, however, the vision of peace includes, at best, some pragmatic arrangements to be reached after long and agonizing negotiations between fierce enemies unable to overcome their mutual feelings of hatred and revenge. Grossman may be hinting at his own nostalgia for the 20 good old years, before the occupation destroyed all hope for a better future, when he makes Ora speak of 20 good years she and her family had which she is now not taking for granted. It is something the ancient Greeks would be punished for, she says. For 20 years the family lived “a small, unheroic life, one that deals as little as possible with the situation, God damn it [...] Twenty good years. Until we got trapped” (Grossman 2010, 299).

The feeling of entrapment is not eased by the escape to the end of the land. It is not that the escapees do not occasionally get distracted, as in a sweet fantasy. One such moment occurs when on the trail Ora meets a man in whose eyes she sees herself and her partner but who is more experienced in the practice of escape and makes them realize that the trail is not just a dark tunnel one escapes to but a location which has a name, “The Israel Trail,” and where colours are changing, flowers blossoming, and so on. But this revelation provides no relief. Although the landscape is no longer seen in black and white, it does not turn into a scene that promises a bright future.

This feeling is consistent with recent findings by psychologists concerned with suicide who have shown that the appeal of suicide is less related to the forecasting of negative events than to the little affect people feel toward positive outcomes in the future. Studying how subjects feel about negative and positive futures presented to them (not only whether they expect them to be negative or positive), Marroquin, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Miranda (2013) found that suicide attempters cannot be singled out by their attitude to negative events. Their main characteristic is that they envision less happiness even if positive events were to occur. If the future is therefore less valuable, the researchers conclude, forsaking it in the face of distress carries less of a cost and suicide becomes an option.

Read from this perspective, Grossman's novel leaves little hope for Israelis. They may ignore war, death, and destruction, or push them to the back of their minds when they are at the ballot box, but the habitat they escape to bears little promise. Occasionally, the escapees feel a sense of satisfaction on the trail, as when Avram notes that there is something special about the walk in the wilderness and Ora concurs.

It's so different from my normal life, with the cars and the microwave and the computers, where you can defrost a whole chicken with the click of a button, or send a message to New York [...] This heel-to-toe is much more suited to me. Maybe we can spend our whole lives just walking and walking without ever getting there. (Grossman 2010, 418–419)

But this fantasy cannot last when one is reminded with every step of the culture of bereavement, the failure of coexistence, the geopolitical situation, and the curse of occupation, all of which make Israel's chances of survival gloomy. As Ora, speaking about her country, concludes: "if you think about it logically, if you just think numbers and facts and history, with no illusions, it doesn't have a chance" (Grossman 2010, 420).

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