Outside the Canon: Judith Butler and the Trials of Jewish Philosophy

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In her role as a philosopher and a theorist of gender, Judith Butler is perhaps the most prominent American intellectual writing today. It is thus certainly something of a boon to the discipline of Jewish Studies to see her begin to speak and think as a Jewish thinker. Jewish studies is a field that has not had much visibility in the academy outside of the Israel–Palestine conflict and it has not always been understood to offer the emancipatory promise of some other regions of area studies. Butler’s book then might seem on one level to change its stature, to give it new visibility and contemporary currency. Butler speaks in the book to the issue that most energizes interest in Judaism, but she does so by arguing that Jewish thought can itself provide the right resources for thinking critically about the relation between Jews and Judaism. That is, if we constitute its boundaries in the same way as Butler. With the exception of Emanuel Levinas, the thinkers that Butler chooses to engage in order to make this claim – Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Primo Levi, Edward Said, and Mahmoud Darwish – hardly constitute a typical canon of modern Jewish Thought. Four are Jewish, two Palestinian, and only one worked explicitly with the Jewish canon. Thus, Butler’s book is also something a trial for the discipline itself, for both in its method and its claims it forces us to rethink what it means to bring Jewish resources to bear on contemporary political conflicts.

From the very beginning then the book might seem to be at cross-purposes with itself, claiming to offer a Jewish perspective, to participate thus in the growing body of literature working at the intersection of religion and politics, and yet Butler does so by explicitly passing over the traditional canon of modern Jewish thought and formulating an alternative canon at the margins of the tradition. The effect is thus complex and paradoxical. On the one hand, it seems to suggest that the resources within Judaism for formulating a critique of Zionism are so scant that one has to invent them. While on the other hand, by insisting on reading thinkers who themselves resisted articulating their position as Jewish, she participates in a modern Jewish communitarian tradition, that of returning its stray to the fold. Like Yosef Yerushalmi unearthing the Jewish Freud or Harry Wolfson revealing Spinoza’s Jewish sources or Adam Sandler calling out Jewish celebrities, Butler too

in expanding our conception of Jewishness also reasserts the community’s claim to its own. She is not the first to read Benjamin or Primo Levi as part of the Jewish tradition, but in her case this move would seem to be in tension with her aim of constructing a Jewish diasporic political philosophy with notions of dispossession and relationality at its core.

As any student of Modern Judaism knows well, between the 1880s and 1967, many leading thinkers on both sides of the debate operated under the assumption that Judaism and Zionism were not only separable but also incongruent. Liberal Jewish organizations and thinkers defined Judaism in diasporic terms in an effort to preserve its compatibility with secular citizenship in modern Western states. In France and Germany, some such as Zadoc Kahn, Chief Rabbi of Paris at the centenary of the French Revolution, and Hermann Cohen, the leading theorist of liberal Judaism in Germany before World War I, went as far as declaring their own nations the spiritual homeland of the Jews. In America, the first Reform platforms expressed a distinctly anti-Zionist position. Some congregations shifted their allegiances as late as 1967. And among Zionists, the ghettoized Jew was resurrected as the New Hebrew. As Berdyczewski put it, for the new Zionist generations the living man must take precedence over the Jewish forefathers. Going native involved destroying the Jew as a figure of exile. From the standpoint of modern Jewish history, it thus seems surprising that one would have to argue for the disentanglement of Judaism and Zionism, but more surprising still that one would do so with readings of figures who, with the exception of Emmanuel Levinas, did not see themselves as explicitly Jewish thinkers.

Levinas is thus pivotal to Butler’s argument. He is simultaneously her greatest resource and the object of her harshest critiques. He is the source for her theory of relationality, her strongest candidate for philosopher of Judaism and seems both because of his position in the book and Butler’s articulation of her process to have been her starting point. Levinas is credited with having given “us a conception of ethical relations that make us ethically responsive to those who exceed our immediate sphere of belonging” (12, 14). But he was himself prone to making less than hospitable comments about Israel’s Arab neighbors. According to Butler, Levinas’s own statements about Zionism and indeed about the Palestinian other conflict with this teaching as she identifies it. “He was, of course, the one who implied in an interview that the Palestinian had no face” (23).

For Butler, this is not the cause for dismissal. Rather it obligates us, she suggests, to read him otherwise. Thus, with Levinas her goal is not to pull the outside in but to push Levinas’ thinking away from its communitarian tendencies. This too she sees as a kind of “Jewish” activity, a reading of Levinas against the grain that will open up his ethics to a political usage. But such an approach itself has to eschew history. For Levinas’s writings on the topic of Israel were unfailingly occasional essays, published in response to historical events or given first at the Colloque des Intellectuels Juifs de Langue Francaise. They are inconsistent in their position because Levinas was himself forming and changing his politics in response to history. When treated with this in mind, it becomes apparent that his political positions did not develop despite his philosophy of Judaism but in fact grew out of it, out of the commitment to see the state of Israel as the worldly instantiation of a
prophetic politics, one that in its fragility had to be protected at any cost. It was the pressure to make his ahistorical characterization of Judaism conform to the facts on the ground that lead to Levinas’s — as well as to many of his French Jewish contemporaries’ — more chauvinistic positions.

While attention to Levinas’s historical trajectory, his movement from ambivalence about the Israeli state in 1948 to his claim in 1980 that one cannot feel Jewish in Israel without the consciousness of participating in an exceptional order, may not have altered Butler’s representation of Levinas, his virtues, and his flaws, it may have drawn further attention to some of the implicit dangers in the very task of formulating a philosophy of Judaism.

Butler is herself careful to identify the tensions at work in her project. Her own discussion of her method articulates the difficulties of her task. She wants to acknowledge the particularity of her own position as a thinker, the impossibility that a public discourse can efface its sources, and to resist the claims that tend to go along with religious identification: ascriptions of loyalty and the articulation of a set of norms that gain their force from the authority of the tradition. She wants to argue for her principles as Jewish or at least derived from Jewish sources but without arguing for their Jewish exclusivity. Her solution is to articulate her method as a process of translation, an experiment in the exercise of reception, repetition, and relationality.

Here, once again she depends upon another Jewish thinker working at the margins of the tradition, Jacques Derrida, who wrote explicitly about his own discomfort with Jewish communitarianism and its processes of re-inscription. Derrida never denied his Jewish origins, but also never sought like Butler to speak as a spokesperson for the tradition. Derrida’s thought does not garner a chapter in the book and Butler’s references to the Algerian thinker who devoted one of his own late books to deriving a hospitable “political imaginary” from the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas are scant, but he is nonetheless instrumental to her project. He is referenced in the very terms that Butler uses to describe her method, in her attention to the language of the call and the possibility that its message is itself potentially indecipherable, crucial to her discussion of the challenges to universalization which dog the discipline of philosophy, key to her claim for the role of iterability in recasting the transition from the singular to the universal and evident in her emphasis on the power of translation and the disseminating effect of repetition. On this last point, she does credit Derrida explicitly, but interestingly enough, it is only to rejudaeze him in a move worthy of Yerushalmi, in regards to whom Derrida developed his own critique of Jewish communitarianism. In Derrida’s idea of “dissemination,” we can locate, she suggests, “a certain revenant of messianic scattering,” calling up readings of Derrida who relate his philosophy to the Lurianic Kabbalistic notion of the shevirat ha-kelim, the breaking of the vessels, and the scattering of the sparks (13).

Derrida never rejected the Jewish readings of his work but he also resisted endorsing them, insisting always on his paltry knowledge of the tradition in which he was raised. There is no doubt nonetheless that both claims can be made, Levinas’s philosophy can be mobilized against his politics, and Derrida can be read as a postmodern Kabbalist. It is Derrida’s conception of dissemination that makes both live and compelling options. We can even find a model for such a project in the
claim that Derrida made in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* that Levinas “made us dream in more than one senses of the word, of a revelation before Sinai.”

But Derrida resisted speaking from within the political—theological nexus that was just becoming a prominent paradigm in his later years. He resisted speaking as a Jewish thinker and he saw in Levinas not only the dangers of his Zionism but also the danger of his championing of Judaism as a cultural and political source for public commentary. Nonetheless, I see in Derrida’s own writings on Levinas, on Judaism and on religion more generally a further source for potential inspiration to Butler, one she does not tap, at least not explicitly. In Derrida’s treatment of the relationship between religion and literature, in his discussions of its role as Biblical heir but also as its betrayer, he saw a means to harness Levinas’s notion of relationality, one that resisted espousing a religious model, but did not deny its origins.

Derrida found in the dissemination of text a freedom and a heteronomy that could be conceptualized without reasserting the authority of tradition or invoking an absent sovereign.

Butler too calls on literature finally in her most compelling chapter on Mahmoud Darwish, but she does this without developing a theory of the relation between religion and literature. In fact, she seems to resist navigating the boundary between them even as her analysis and choice of thinkers consistently calls it into view. Thus what I ultimately found most compelling in the book was not its potential as a resource of modern Jewish thought, not its site within that canon, but its submerged plea for poetry.

Butler chooses most often to speak instead of translation as a way of thinking our religious remains, as a navigating of the ruins “sparking the past on occasion” (17) but it is finally in Mahmoud Darwish’s poetry that she finds her most fruitful source, particularly in the poem “Edward Said: A contrapuntal reading” where, as in Kafka’s “Letter to my father,” a key text for Derrida in *Gift of Death*, a dialogue proceeds through a ventriloquized voice. Said’s is invoked, but after his death, thus as a fictionalized specter. The poem solicits his presence as a way of signaling his absence, as a legacy, whose force comes not only from what he says but also from the fact that the poem is already about his loss; the fact that he is no longer there and yet the poem speaks and has a future. Near the close of the book, Butler does ask, with Darwish, “What can poetry say in a time of catastrophe” and also “what does the saying of poetry do to open up a future beyond catastrophe” (PW 221). Butler’s book thus may gain its greatest visibility as a new contribution to Modern Jewish Thought but its most important insights come from asking what it means to think beyond it.

**Notes on contributor**

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Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism is a curious thing in amalgamating Jewish ethics in terms of self-dispersal and political critique. The book hits its mark by pressing in on Zionism from multiple margin-points. In the form of a negation, its author, Judith Butler, argues the case against Zionism as a historical form of settler-colonialism, while philosophically she positions Jewish ethics against political forms of sovereign power and state violence. As a construction, the utopian core of the project is to advance a common space for Jews and Palestinians as a non-sovereign, binational compact, to open up new forms of cultural, political, and social cohabitation. Readings of Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Mahmoud Darwish, Emmanuel Levinas, and Edward Said are themselves exemplary. Iconic figures, they have been brought in by Butler from their place either at the margins or from outside the boundaries of Jewishness. Their purpose is to perform critical work in Jewish philosophy by calling into question static notions of Jewishness in the name of a just and capacious critical-cosmopolitanism.

Historically, Butler’s own anti-Zionism recalls the ideological heyday of east European Jewish socialism and of liberal cosmopolitanism and Reform Judaism in central Europe before the Holocaust and then the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. But with no little irony, Butler’s critique of Zionism bears no little resemblance to Zionism itself, historically considered. Indeed, the interpenetration of Jewishness, secularism, and cosmopolitanism were bedrock principles in the classical Zionist theories penned by writers as diverse across the ideological spectrum as Theodore Herzl, Max Nordau, Joseph Hayyim Brenner, Micah Joseph Berdichevsky, A.D. Gordon, Martin Buber, and Vladimir Jabotinsky. While these figures go unnamed and unmentioned in Parting Ways, they all rejected static notions of Jewishness no less vociferously than does Butler today. These were the most important critics undermining models that pegged Jewishness as “religion,” be that the German Jewish liberal religion of ethical monotheism or the orthodox

practice of mitzvoth and pious waiting for the messiah. Historically, the more fluid, corporeal notion of Jewishness belonged to Zionism much more than to the other competing ideologies at the time, religious, or secular. Despite itself, the attempt in Parting Ways to sever Jewishness and Judaism from the self-imposing ghetto of Zionism stands in mirror image to the historical form of political Zionism intended to save Jewishness from galut (exile) Judaism.

One hundred years ago maybe it was possible, but is there any way to separate Jewishness and Zionism today? That its critics seem every bit as focused on Zionism as its defenders indicates the deepest imbrication of this ideological form into modern Jewish life. Beyond its formal status as a state, Israel is a biomorph with a population of some few millions. A large intentional object in the Jewish universe, Israel pulls and bends Jewish attention around it – just as would a large or sufficiently dense astronomical body bend time and space around its mass. The more the critic tries to pull away from it, to separate the Jews and Judaism from the State of Israel, the more closely they all align together. Owing to the intensely associational character of Jewish group dynamics, the idea of separating Jewishness and Judaism from Israel and Zionism cuts too sharply against deeply engrained ideas of Jewish peoplehood and stubborn habits of solidarity. Which is why, when Butler and other Jewish critics of Zionism write about Jewishness and Judaism, the very political frame of her analysis keeps them tethered to Israel, as a place if not to the state. The fact that Butler’s own theoretical and political foray into Jewishness has been spinning insistently around and depending upon Israel and Zionism even if in the form of a negation (especially in the form of a negation) would be a case in point.

As an emblem of modern Jewish worldliness, is there any way to separate the two, Jewishness and Zionism? Brought by Butler for a brief supporting cameo in Parting Ways, the example of Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig would actually anticipate the spatial configuration of Jewish religion and the deep connection between Palestine and modern Jewishness already early on in the twentieth century. A masterpiece of German expressionism, Rosenzweig’s 1921 The Star of Redemption is a major presence in the canon of Jewish philosophy. It is a work in which a model of Judaism was built on extra-territorial forms of holy land, holy language, and holy law that are virtually extra-terrestrial. Spectral, these forms hover over “real” land, language, and law, over against and in contradiction to historical time and state power. But for only so long. Looked at from the perspective of the history of style, it was impossible to sustain the heat generated at the boiling core of the star of redemption, the bathos and pathos of creation, revelation, and redemption performed by its author. By the mid-1920s, Rosenzweig’s thought had cooled down. Like so many forms of German art and literature after expressionism, the more sober approach was sachlich in style. Turning away from “the star of redemption,” Rosenzweig was drawn if only just a little toward the gravity represented by the Yishuv (pre-state Jewish settlement in British Mandate Palestine). Rosenzweig’s opposition to Zionism softened as the image of Zion came back down to earth.

In a May 1927 letter to Benno Jacob, a leader of the liberal, anti-Zionist Jewish community in Germany, Rosenzweig had Tel Aviv in mind when he claimed, “[Religion] needs spontaneity. And when I consider what has spontaneously arisen
in Palestine, I must admit that nowhere in the world have the demands of religious liberalism been met, even today, as fully as there.” “[T]ake the observance of Sabbath!” The Zionists smoke, write letters, and arrange sporting events. Even if the Orthodox regard it as hillul Shabbat, a desecration of the Sabbath, Rosenzweig could not feel that way. He wrote, “As for Tel Aviv, the “town of speculators,” which most Zionists view as a questionable Zionist achievement – I cannot help but be impressed by the fact that all stores there close from kiddush to havdalah, and that thus, at any rate, the mold into which the content of the Sabbath can flow is provided.” Secular Zionism more than held its own against Diaspora Judaism. “Where do we have that here?” Referring to the secular Reali school in Haifa, Rosenzweig remarked how pupils read the Bible in Hebrew, which made him “shudder at the mere thought” of religious instruction in Germany.²

Drawn not to the hoary image of sanctified Jerusalem or to the utopian socialism of the kibbutz movement, but to the fulcrum of secular Zionist culture and commerce, the letter to Jacob highlights an urbanity that undermines the dogmatic anti-Zionism set out in The Star of Redemption. A signal to Rosenzweig’s own spontaneity of expression, synagogue and Sabbath, are no longer a strict monopoly set by their orthodox interpreters. They remain open to the seculum. The appeal of Sabbath sporting events had already been anticipated by remarks about gesture, processionals, and physical movement in The Star of Redemption, but never in relation to Judaism. A new look at Zionism thus marked for Rosenzweig a radical shift toward a space broader than the limiting parameters of diasporic congregational life. Against any ideological extreme, Zionist or anti-Zionist, the letter to Jacob reflects the in-between juncture where life “gravitates back to earth.”³

In an earlier communication, also from May of 1927, Rosenzweig had tried to mediate Cohen’s anti-Zionism and Buber’s Zionism. Jerusalem is a messianic symbol, but for a symbol to become more than an arbitrary appendage it must somewhere and somehow reflect an unsymbolic reality. Against the Zionists, he observed, “Warmth is not only to be found where there is sunlight – that is a Zionist superstition – but wherever I have a good stove.” Rosenzweig now made the following counter-claim. His own “Frankfurt wisdom,” a play off the rabbinic expression “Greek wisdom,” depends upon the Land of Israel, not just the one that was but the one that will be and the Palestine of today which links the two. “[T]he coal and the wood which warm me today could not have grown […] if there were no sun […] The real sun!” Life requires a real point set in space, “[n]ot merely a painted symbol, no matter how attractive the painting!”⁴ In still another letter from the same month and year, Rosenzweig explained to Jacob that the messianic vision of a convocation of nations and world peace will entail a miraculous transformation of human nature. This faith came from Jewish prayer books, the Siddur and Mahzor, and he cannot tear Zion from it. He did not know

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³ Ibid., p. 358.
⁴ Ibid., p. 354–5.
how big and how modern Jewish Palestine might one day become, but he did not begrudge it its factories and highways.5

About the actual conflicts roiling modern Zionism in the 1920s, one notes Rosenzweig’s complete inability to read the political map. The letters to Jacob ignored animosity based on religion or inter-national conflict. No one at the time could have foreseen the success with which religious nationalist and ultra-orthodox streams of Judaism have since overwhelmed religious life in the State of Israel after the Holocaust; or the deep resentments their political monopoly would engender on the part of the less and non-observant majority. Rosenzweig innocently presumed that Reform Judaism would dominate religious life in Palestine, without realizing how alien it was to the politically radical young Jews from Eastern Europe and their sabra children spearheading early Zionist culture as it began to harden in the 1930s. As for the Arab-Jewish conflict, one of his last letters before his death refers to the 1929 Hebron riots, his fear for the future of Zionism, and his worry about an English-Muslim war.6 With an eye toward a broader civilizational clash between the western world and Islam, Rosenzweig overlooked the immediate threat of Arab-Jewish enmity, a danger clearly understood by Buber, Gershom Scholem, and other members in Brit Shalom already in the early 1920s.

Contrary to the use to which Rosenzweig is often put by critics of Israel, I would like to play with the counter-notion that Butler as well might find it not so easy to part ways from Zionism. Under the right conditions, one could even imagine how Butler herself might be drawn into conversations that turn her into something not too at odds with a form of what today goes by the name “liberal Zionism.” Only a little tongue in cheek, I offer this claim on the basis of remarks made by her at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) annual conference in 2013. To be sure, it is not my intention to ascribe any finality to these impromptu remarks at a panel dedicated to Parting Ways. But one notes that their articulation in a setting consisting primarily of Jewish philosophers underscores the situational character of Jewish political thought and the abiding gravitational pull exercised by Zionism and the State of Israel upon Jewish life today. The power of this form is shown in its capacity to turn even its staunchest Jewish critic into something of a crypto-Zionist. About the author’s own intention I cannot vouchsafe one way or the other. All I have to go on is my own sense of the digital record of her public remarks.7 Organized for the Theology and Continental Philosophy Group of the AAR by Ellen Armour, the panel was dominated mostly by scholars and theoretical perspectives drawn from Jewish philosophy and thought. These were presented by Rebecca Adler, Sam Brody, Yaniv Feller, Claire Katz, and Martin Kavka. Characterized by a deliberative back and forth, the discussion stands in contrast to the declarative tone marked by the book under discussion. By taking Israel and Palestine out of the heat of a polemical rhetoric and supercharged political tropes, the panel and panelists brought out dimensions to Butler’s thinking about Israel and

5 Rosenzweig F. Der Mensch und sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften, vol.1: Briefe und Tagebücher (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff; 1976), p. 1145. (Siddur and Mahzor refer, respectively to the order of daily and Shabbat prayer, and the order of prayer for the High Holidays of Rosh Ha’Shanna and Yom Kippur).
6 Ibid., p. 1228.
Palestine that were not much, if at all in evidence in *Parting Way*. With generous care, Butler responded to the panelists and to the general controversy that her book has generated for many Jewish readers less inclined to address that controversy with the same thoughtful consideration brought to it by the panelists.

The first thing that bears saying is how her conceptualization of Zionism at the AAR within a Jewish philosophical framework was different in kind than talks and comments that Butler has given at other venues – such as at Brooklyn College to support BDS, at Columbia University with Cornel West to honor the memory of Edward Said, or at a teach-in at Berkeley, all of which found their way to Youtube. Instead of being reduced to “settler-colonialism,” Zionism at this AAR panel was discussed both by the majority of panelists and by Butler herself as a variegated political phenomenon with deep philosophical stakes that are both particular to the Jewish people and “universal” to the human condition. Instead of separating Jewishness and Zionism, the discussion and Butler’s contribution to it forced even more deeply their “cohabitation.”

In retrospect, this should have come as no surprise. *Parting Ways* is driven by philosophical theses regarding (1) subjectivity and subject formation, (2) Jewishness and Judaism, and (3) Israel. None of them stand out in any particular way as radical in relation to the mainstream of the Jewish philosophical tradition and to liberal Jewish political thinking more generally.

(1) The theoretical points developed by Butler regarding cohabitation, precarity, and responsibility integrate easily into a philosophical tradition whose proponents have long understood the relational, non-substantivist character of human subjectivity. Most of these topoi are readily recognizable to any reader of the Jewish philosophical tradition starting with Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, including Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, and Emmanuel Levinas. Their attention by Butler puts her inside the main current of the Jewish philosophical tradition, not outside of it.

(2) Also familiar points in Jewish philosophy are the ideas that Jewish identity is not exclusively or even explicitly Jewish *per se*, that Judaism and Jewish identity are not static, that Jewish social and religious identities are defined in relation to broader historical contexts and geographical environments. These are already staples of nineteenth century historicism and the science of Judaism (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*). As for anti-essentialism in Judaism, that modernist topos has been honed to profound effect by Buber, Rosenzweig, and Scholem in the first half of the twentieth century.

(3) Given the recent, reactionary fear and fury in the Jewish community surrounding BDS, it is hard to remember that it is a loud and obnoxious minority in the community who would actually insist that Zionism should “control” Judaism and Jewishness or that any and all criticism of Israel and the 1967 occupation equals anti-Semitism. The place of BDS, anti-Zionism, and advocates of a one-state solution within the organized Jewish community remains a vexed and painful issue. But among most if not all proponents of a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, there has long been a broad consensus in and across the Jewish community that what
Butler has called “the wretched bi-nationalism” on the ground in Israel and Palestine is morally and politically unsustainable.

Butler’s comments in response to the panel represent a subtle modification of previously stated positions. Federated, shared concepts of sovereignty and citizenship are now recognized by Butler not as anti-Zionism but as a minority form of historical Zionism. Buber is now considered to be worth a second look. More to the point is the closeness of Butler’s remarks to a “liberal” form of political Zionism with even the critique of state sovereignty losing some of the absolute force with which it is met in her published writings. Butler now ascribes value to the idea of Jewish political self-determination, which she situates alongside the rights of others, namely, the Palestinian right to self-determination. The assumption that the rights of others and the creation of a just polity necessarily condition any people’s right to self-determination hardly stands out as radical. Lastly, Butler insists that she no longer wants to talk about being pro- or anti-Israel or pro- or anti-Palestine. While I am sure she must have used the term “settler colonialism” at the AAR, it is not in the foreground. Paraphrasing Arendt, Butler admits that regarding Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Jews, like any other group of people, need and needed sanctuary as refugees. In her retrospective analysis, at no point is Palestine ruled out as that place of refuge.

Such statements lend themselves to all sorts of discursive mischief. Butler’s thinking here reflects a perfectly parve form of liberal Zionism. Her remarks at the AAR do not reflect the same rhetorical positioning found in Parting Ways. If anything, they suggest something about the effective and moderating power of genuine civil discourse to shade or blunt sharply held points of views. Maybe it should have been no surprise at all that these remarks by Butler were in dialog with colleagues willing to work through her argument, but doing so from perspectives more clearly reflecting and refracting central strands in the Jewish philosophical tradition. More J Street than Electronic Intifada, the discussion suggests it may not be so easy to divest Jewishness and Judaism from Zionism and Israel.

It is the very attempt to untie the knot that since 1967 has deepened the commitments of Jewishness and Zionism to each other, which brings the critic of Israel more deeply into the mutual and self-reinforcing orbit created by this coupling. As a powerful nation-state form and as a demographic mass, Israel generates too much energy for any form of Jewish philosophy or Jewish philosophical politics to ever fully turn away. The more one seeks to a force separation, the more tightly one combines the two together. That we see this irony in Butler’s own work and public comments about Zionism and the State of Israel has everything to do with hegemony, understood here as part and parcel of the profoundly associational character of Judaism and Jewishness, and the performative canons of Jewish thought and Jewish culture. Butler’s own foray into these canons and cultural politics highlights the dynamic. Writing against Zionism from inside a Jewish frame moves the author toward and inside this object, not out of and away from it.

While it might be that Jewishness and some kind of Zionism cannot part ways, the more indelible point made by Butler in her book is that there is no way to part Israel and Palestine. But even here, one wonders if Butler overlooked how the actual form of this cohabitation remains such an uneasy one – inviting, demanding, and generating the very violence that she rejects, morally and politically. In a more pessimistic light than hers, it is the very latest currents of asymmetrical violence in Gaza and Israel that might very well constitute an integral part of that cohabitation out of which one state, in fact, begins to take shape in Israel-Palestine. Whether one justifies or condemns a certain side in the conflict, when viewed at the surface it is hard to see how last summer’s violence will have done anything but damage to the people of Gaza and to the Palestinian national cause while Israel gets itself absorbed into Palestine with no possible exit strategy. It could be that what we are looking at today is the ugly logic of no exit and compulsion best explored by psychoanalytic theories and categories. Established almost half a century ago in 1967 with the coupling of two territories under the unequal control of one political sovereign, this logic begins to tighten with the uptick in ideological settlements in 1977, with the failure of the Oslo accords, and with the Second Intifada. In this violent cohabitation, the peoples in conflict cut more deeply and viciously into the body politic of the other from within the inside.

The form of cohabitation in question has nothing to do with the cause and effect based on an exteriorized positioning of friends over here and enemies over there. Each violent surge and counter-surge does nothing to drive the two warring systems apart. Binding the parties more closely together, each successive blow absorbs the two into a single morbid body, at war with itself, defined by increasing tempos of abuse and aversion. Profoundly intimate, it would look like the mythic force of some divine violence, eros coupling with thanatos. Maintained is a subterranean attraction running against the surface current of this or that ideological, moral, and rhetorical posturing. Creating new and terrifying hybrids, nested one inside the other, there would be no way out for either party to this cohabitation short of a catastrophe, some \textit{nakba}, some \textit{hurban} that no one of sound sense wants. Stuck in this situation, all of us who care as deeply as Butler about Israel, Palestine, and their people will have to come to terms with ugly cohabitation, to make its form better and just. No matter one’s ideological and national orientation, this much is certain. If there can be no way to part the ways between Jewishness and Zionism, or between Israel and Palestine, then “we” are in this all together. Only the outcome remains uncertain.

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On Judith Butler’s *Parting Ways* as Jewish Philosophy

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In this brief essay, I want to make one claim about the nature of the argument of *Parting Ways*¹ and then raise one question about the limits of that argument.

*Parting Ways* presents itself as an attempt to articulate Jewishness in terms of a relation to alterity, which both grounds and interrupts Jewish identity. As Butler writes in her introduction, “Is this a Jewish notion? Yes and no.” This claim about the nature of Jewish identity is what authorizes her detachment from Zionism at the same time that it authorizes her attachment to a diasporic notion of Jewishness or Judaism. Yet although the book announces itself as an intervention into the reflexive equation of Judaism or Jewishness with Zionism, it is perhaps surprising that Zionism goes unmentioned for large chunks of the book, particularly in the second through the fourth chapters, which treat Levinas and Benjamin (although the ends of the latter two of these chapters do address contemporary political matters). After the first chapter, which endorses a challenge to identity politics common to the work of Edward Said and parts (but not all) of the Levinasian corpus, and in effect amplifies Said’s call to Jews to remember the exilic ground of their identity (represented in the person of the Egyptian Jew Moses), Butler offers three chapters in which she argues that (a) Levinas’s thought, especially his argument about substitution as acknowledging “the other in me,” demonstrates that there is no archē of meaning found in the self and the self alone, (b) this antiprincipism is echoed in Benjamin’s claim in “Critique of Violence” that there is something sacred in life that transcends naturalist accounts, and thus is also “allied with the anarchistic” (85), and (c) Benjamin’s account of the messianic also serves to interrupt and question the apparent clarity of any and all conceptual thinking. These claims serve, somehow, to set up the masterful detachment of Judaism and Zionism that occurs in the fifth chapter.

But why does the articulation of this political position require pages of grappling with two Jewish philosophers, one (Levinas) whom Prof. Butler explicitly reads in a heterodox manner (“I would prefer to think with Levinas against Levinas,” she writes), and another (Benjamin) whose work she suggests is more suggestive and elliptical than one might imagine would be ideal for a book that seeks to justify an account of Jewishness as anti-identitarian? What are these pages doing here? I want to

suggest that over and above the concrete political claims that Butler makes in *Parting Ways*, there is also an argument about the nature and limits of Jewish philosophy.

That argument, it seems to me, is that Jewish philosophy is a discourse of disidentification. Prof. Butler has treated disidentification in her work before, and while I am reluctant to say that *Parting Ways* is merely another application of a method she has described earlier in her career, I do think that articulations of antiessentialism that appear earlier in her work are helpful for reading of *Parting Ways*. In Butler’s brief treatment of disidentification in the chapter of her 1993 book *Bodies That Matter* that takes up the work of Slavoj Žižek, she wrote the following: “If essentialism is an effort to preclude the possibility of a future for the signifier, then the task is surely to make the signifier into a site for a set of rearticulations that cannot be predicted or controlled, and to provide for a future in which constituencies will form that have not yet had a site for such an articulation or which ‘are’ not prior to the siting of such a site” (219). This antiessentialist move – which invokes not a sense of the inability for a concept to have meaning (in *Bodies That Matter*, the concept “women”), but rather a sense of concepts to have multiple contested meanings, coming up against each other in something that is not unlike the Bacchanalian revel described in the opening of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* – is explicitly linked in this section with a stance of “politicizing disidentification.” These pages serve as an expansion of the brief claim in the introduction to *Bodies That Matter* that “the persistence of disidentification is [...] crucial to the rearticulation of democratic contestation” (4).

This term “disidentification” has its *locus classicus* in Michel Pêcheux’s *Language, Semantics, and Ideology*, where it is distinguished both from identification with dominant discourses as well as from a counter-identification that turns against the universal subject by wholly separating itself from it. Counter-identification still remains determined by the dominant discourse of the universal subject; in disidentification, however, one finds a “subjective transformation” (170) of discourse in which ideological formations are overthrown and rearranged. A bit more clearly, José Esteban Muñoz, in his work *Disidentifications*, describes the work of the disidentifying agent as follows: “like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life” (12). Insofar as the aim of *Parting Ways* is to show that Judaism or Jewishness is something that can be taken up in an anti-identitarian manner, it is a book that makes Judaism or Jewishness a site of disidentification, for a subject-position is being taken up at the same time that the very subject-position taken up is one that threatens and contests the very subject who takes up this stance. Always outside her own identity, the disidentifying subject works within ideological processes in order to unhook concepts from their ordinary referents, and thereby open up a future in which they can take on new meanings for new audiences. Levinas and Benjamin, therefore, are not simply other disidentifying figures. They are themselves evidence that Judaism or Jewishness can be linked with

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2 Hegel GWF. Phenomenology of spirit.
3 Muñoz JE. Disidentifications (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; 1999).
disidentification, because it has been linked with disidentification in the past. Because Levinas, in various Talmudic readings, links Judaism with the inability to arrive at an “ontological resolution for the ‘I’ or the ‘we’.” Levinas – and Judaism – are figures of disidentification, taking up identities that paradoxically cannot be taken up. Because Benjamin affirms the messianic or the divine as that which interrupts natural identity-formations, he too, as well as the theological categories he invokes, are sites of disidentification. There are other figures in the Jewish philosophical canon that argue similarly. Hermann Cohen argued for an anti-communitarian notion of Judaism in Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism, in which the fullness of the people of Israel is never present at any moment, but is to be produced in the future as the unity of humankind. Moses Mendelssohn argued in Jerusalem that the meaning of Judaism lay in the possibly different accounts of Judaism’s significance held by a teacher and a student. Benedictus de Spinoza, as Nancy Levene has so beautifully shown, argued in the Theologico-Political Treatise that prophets transcend human nature insofar as they supply a community with images that motivate people to act virtuously toward one another, i.e. to take relationality as key to their identity. (This is something that Christianity decidedly does not do, for Spinoza.) It would be foolish to essentialize Judaism or Jewishness as disidentification. Rather, I want to say that it is only in Jewish philosophy – a discourse which stretches from a single community to the whole of humanity and back again, a discourse which affirms the particular only insofar as it is for the universal, and which affirms the universal only insofar as it is for the particular, a discourse structured by the simultaneous desire of Jews for emancipation (for the status of the universal subject) and the inability in the history of the modern West for Jews to fulfill that desire (always remaining particular) – and in that pairing of “Jewish” and “philosophy” that the work of disidentification can occur. If philosophy is that which allows the concept “Jewish” (whether it refers to the noun “Judaism” or “Jewishness”) to come to clarity, then it is not simply the case, after reading Butler’s accounts of Levinas and Benjamin, that “Jewish” is something that stands apart from political Zionism. Rather, Zionism is something that stands apart from all “Jewish” identities once Jewish philosophy has done its work.

That is my account of the argument of Parting Ways. Taking up Jewish philosophers as sites of disidentification, Butler implies that Judaism and/or Jewishness themselves must be sites of disidentification, that one cannot be Jewish without giving up Judaism and/or Jewishness at the same time (and likewise, one cannot give up either of those identities without also taking them up!). I love this argument. In part, I love it because it clarifies why I do and what I do professionally. In addition, a bit more selfishly, I think it allows me to argue to colleagues and deans at my own institution and others that they should take directions in Jewish-studies hiring that privilege Jewish philosophy. And yet, there is one question that remains, I think. Why should one affirm the authority of the Jewish philosopher? Why should

5 Butler, Parting ways, p. 66.
6 Cohen H. Religion of reason out of the sources of Judaism. Translated by: Kaplan S (Atlanta: Scholars Press; 1995), e.g. p. 253.
7 Mendelssohn M. Jerusalem: or on religious power and Judaism. 1783.
8 Levene NK. Spinoza’s revelation religion, democracy, and reason (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2009).
one be a Jewish philosopher, and not simply a Jew? Why should one disidentify? Certainly one can disidentify, and Butler has shown this. But when one reads about these examples of Jewish thinkers – not only Levinas and Benjamin, but also Arendt and Levi – who all suggest that “to ‘be’ a Jew is to be departing from oneself” (15), one can imagine a reader who will ask about the force of this suggestion. Was it simply biography, or historical context, that led these figures to link Jewish identity with the exilic? Butler rightly affirms that the “exilic” and the “Jewish” are not “analytically” linked; rather, they have become linked over time, and large swaths of the contemporary world (especially the world of Jewish leaders) have forgotten this. But why should they remember it? Why should they care about Jewish philosophers? What is the ground of Jewish philosophy’s power to oblige others?

One of Butler’s answers to this question seems to come in the final sentences of Parting Ways, in which she, with the aid of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, supplies a beautiful image of an alliance between exiles, whether Jews, Arabs, or Palestinians. I do wonder whether this is the only answer Butler offers in the book, for it seems to me to be surprisingly utopian, a move of counter-identification to dominant discourse today about the relationship between Judaism and Zionism. There seems to be another answer, which is that a life that does not take the possibility of contestation as being essential to what it means to be human is a life lived in false consciousness. But if that is also an answer, then I hesitate to see how the dream unleashed by unhooking Judaism or Jewishness from Zionism is any more powerful than the dream unleashed by the Zionist idea. Near the close of Eichmann in Jerusalem, Hannah Arendt wrote that “if genocide is an actual possibility of the future, then no people on earth—least of all, of course, the Jewish people, in Israel or elsewhere—can feel reasonably sure of its continued existence without the help and the protection of international law.”9 On the one hand, this is about the debt that any particular people owes to the universal, about how the “Jewish” is predicated upon the “non-Jewish,” as Butler argues in the chapter on Arendt in Parting Ways. But it is also about the way in which the protection offered by the universal, in Arendt’s mind, enacts and verifying itself in a particular people’s feeling “reasonably sure of its continued existence.” The Jewish is about the exilic, but it is also about an identity that is a home. As a site of disidentification, “Jewish” is necessarily also a site of contestation. This means, I suspect, that all dreams of alliances – whether between exiles, or between exiles and autochthons – will eventually be dashed against its shore, and that it is Jewish philosophy that will someday show why the collapse of all of those dreams was necessary. I hope, and perhaps I even pray, that Butler will show me why my suspicion is false.

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Melancholic Judaism, Ecstatic Ethics, Uncertain Politics

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There is nothing new about the claim that dominant and dominating identities are sustained by the demonized other they construct and become dependent upon for their very existence. James Baldwin made this point brilliantly when he wrote:

It is the American Republic [...] which created something which they call a “nigger.” They created it out of necessities of their own. The nature of the crisis is that I am not a “nigger” — I never was. I am a man. The question with which the country is confronted is this: Why do you need a “nigger” in the first place, and what are you going to do about him now that he’s moved out of his place? ¹

There is also nothing new about the claim that one of the difficulties with identity politics is that it makes, as Wendy Brown put it, “a cultural or political fetish out of subordinated identities, out of the effects of subordination.” ² This is one way to read Sarte’s famous pronouncement that “[…] it is the anti-Semite, who makes the Jew.” ³ In Parting Ways, Judith Butler attempts to name Zionism(s) as a kind of Jewish collective fantasy of sovereignty, precipitated and consolidated by anti-Semitism, in order to diagnose Jews’ collective attachment to that wounded, melancholic identity. ⁴ In other words, she does not so much ask why the anti-Semite needs the “Jew,” in Baldwin’s sense, but rather why Israel, as a nation-state, needs the “Jew” of anti-Semitism, who, in turn, needs a particular construction of foreign enemies — Palestinians and others. Crucial to staging this question is Butler’s suggestion that there are other ways of being made a Jew and working through the

⁴ Although Butler acknowledges that “Zionism” is an umbrella for a variety of different historical movements, positions, and styles of thought, with different, even competing, agenda, she nonetheless sees any and every articulation of Zionism as a form of colonialism: “In any case, given the contemporary formations of Zionism, it is my view that one cannot be a Zionist and struggle for a just end to colonial subjugation. Even the experiments in socialism that characterized the kibbutz movement were an integral part of the settler colonial project, which means that in Israel socialism was understood to be compatible with colonial subjugation and expansion.” Butler J. Parting ways: Jewishness and the critique of Zionism (New York: Columbia University Press; 2013), p. 19.
history and trauma of anti-Semitism, ways that loosen this collective attachment to the “Jew” of anti-Semitism. The proposed alternative is an ethics of dispersion, the renunciation of sovereignty, and the realization that we are not the self-legislating, self-transparent sovereign subjects of (caricatured) liberalism. Instead, we are revealed as non-sovereign and heteronomous by our encounter with the other.

For Butler, ethics is neither a successful metabolizing of local norms (à la Aristotle), nor is it self-cultivation (à la Nietzsche and Foucault); rather, ethics is what undoes both allegiance to local norms and the subject sedimented through stylized repetitions of that allegiance. We are only ethical, then, when we are being “dispossessed from sovereignty and nation in response to the claims made by those one does not fully know and did not fully choose.” The ethical scene that makes the other’s demand upon me audible (and, frequently, inaudible) is mediated by discourse and, as such, is suffused with relations of power. The ethicality of the call is not in its demand that I respond and respond well. Instead, the ethicality of the call is secured by marking the limits of my knowledge and capacity to respond well. Ethics, then, is bound up with interruption, revision, or displacement. Yet, these interruptions, revisions, or displacements are not only deconstructive. An ethical demand concomitantly articulates a norm that corresponds with a community not yet constituted. For this reason, Butler suggests that the “destabilization of the ‘we’ is a precondition for thinking the new.”

Clearly, Butler has high hopes for the political payoff of this understanding of ethics, claiming that “What follows from this displacement is a collective struggle to find forms of political governance that institute principles of equality and justice for the full demographic of the region.” A number of her readers, primarily from the discipline of political theory, however, raise important concerns about the efficacy of Butler’s proposal. Seyla Benhabib suggests that Butler does not even offer us an ethics, let alone a politics. According to Benhabib, while Butler claims to be offering an ethics of cohabitation, she is actually elaborating a social ontology – an account of what it is to live in the world collectively. The difference, for Benhabib, is that a social ontology, however rigorous in its accounting for the co-constitution of selves and others, cannot issue the normative ought of an ethics. Benhabib worries that from an account of what one is vis-à-vis the social, a pedagogy of moral reasoning does not follow. That I now know what I am (“ec-statically relational” vis-à-vis the other), in a world necessarily inhabited by a plurality of others with a variety of demands upon me, gives me no information about how to decide upon action – what I should do. A decent ethical theory requires that one is able to move between the norms of formal equality, for example, and the reality of substantive differences or, even more basically, the ability to translate between the duties

5 Ibid., p. 9.
6 Ibid., p. 11.
7 Ibid., p. 18. The displacement Butler describes here occurs when someone who is a visible, included part of the nation is prompted to respond to the one who does not belong and the ethical relationality that displaces the parameters of who belongs and who does not, the parameters of the nation itself.
one has toward the “Other” in the abstract and what that action looks like *vis-à-vis* this particular, concrete other standing in front of me.\(^9\) George Shulman worries that Butler’s turn to “ethics” as some extra-political, humanistic truth, constitutes a community but does so at the cost of depoliticization.\(^10\) Shulman’s concern is that Butler seems to have gotten the ethics-politics timeline inverted. It is not that individual commitments to ethical “oughts” generate a politics of love, radical inclusivity, and non-violence. Rather, it is precisely the politics of collective action that creates the kind of world where ethical obligations are even visible as such. Ella Myers, in a similar vein, questions the path from Butler’s Levinasean ethics to democratic politics. The cultivation of receptivity *vis-à-vis* the other does not open up, necessarily, onto a “third” or a collective negotiation of what the world is and what kinds of things are in this world that we share. Ethical attunement does not necessarily lead to political action. Moreover, certain actions that are politically productive may go against a properly ethical attunement, as Levinas himself notes.\(^11\)

One of the difficulties of Butler’s retrieval of “ethics” is that it seems to assume that Zionism, and its accompanying discursive frameworks, persists because political Zionists of all sorts operate with a distorted social ontology – one that figures the subject as sovereign and individuated rather than social and constituted in relation to others. Yet, Zionism could just as well rely for its legitimation on the very social ontology Butler proposes. In other words, Zionism takes as its point of departure the fact of non-sovereignty, relationality, and vulnerability. Julie Cooper notes that while political Zionism was animated by a desire for collective autonomy and political self-determination in response to anti-Semitism and Jewish collective vulnerability, Butler seems to think that Zionism is an effect of a philosophically mistaken notion of Jewish identity.\(^12\) The “if/then” formula of Butler’s argument suggests that if only Jews were operating with a post-structuralist account of subject formation, then surely alterity ethics and democratic political practices would follow.\(^13\) Cooper suggests that insofar as political Zionism was a way for Jews to exercise political agency, critique of Zionism must offer viable alternative forms of political agency, not merely abstract ethical principles.\(^14\)

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9. Ibid. One might counter here that what Benhabib might see as the movement between abstract and concrete Butler understands as translation. Butler, Parting ways, p. 12–3.
10. Discussing Butler’s post-9/11 book, *Precarious Life*, Shulman argues that Butler’s “ethical turn” “[…]occludes politics […] for she depicts a melancholic national subject trapped within a monolithic image produced by centralized media, not a political community divided by how differently situated people (can) see, by what they know, and by what they count as real. In her account, war is not produced by collective (and bureaucratic) actors mobilizing support through material interests and symbolic affects; nor is torture enabled by complex bureaucratic vulnerability that constitutes a political subject defining itself as sovereign, and violence can be overcome only if that subject undergoes or undertakes the transforming acknowledgement constituting ethical experience.” A similar critique can be made about Parting Ways. Shulman G. Acknowledgement and disavowal as an idiom for theorizing politics. Theory Event. 2011;14(1):26.
13. Myers also notes the “if/then” construction of Butler’s argument. Myers, Worldly ethics, p. 82.
I wish neither to explain nor, worse, explain away the above-described challenges to Butler’s work. I do, however, want to consider some of the resources of the text, in order to gesture toward some of its political and politicizing possibilities. *Parting Ways* is an effort to make visible a form of Jewish identification divergent from the Jewishness in whose name the state of Israel speaks. At stake is not the question of representation – that Butler, as a Jew, does not see the state of Israel as an embodiment and representation of her will. Rather, at stake is the capacity to diagnose Zionism as a regulatory regime that does not simply exclude Palestinians or anti-Zionist diaspora Jews from its polity but also ceaselessly manufactures a normative vision of Judaism. That normative vision is of a melancholic Judaism that refuses to acknowledge its various histories of loss. Instead of finding new, viable objects of collective identification, melancholic Judaism persists in internalizing and feeding off of that loss. This melancholic attachment has several consequences. First, it makes the actual process of grieving impossible – grieving for traumatic losses and lacerations of the history of anti-Semitism and dispossession. Second, it depoliticizes the ongoing structural effects of the past, making invisible various forms of stratification amid Jews and making it difficult, if not impossible, to assess the actual (rather than the perceived) collective vulnerability faced by Jews. Additionally, this melancholic Judaism, which mistakes the historical effects of subordination for the totality of its identity, begins to need the anti-Semite, the Palestinian threat, the Holocaust denier, the terrorist, and so on. And this need is reflected in how social and political arrangements are patterned. In other words, melancholy keeps Jews attached to a certain symbolization and narration of loss (exile, shoah, anti-Semitism, and other experiences of victimization) that both erases the actuality of that loss and concomitantly keeps Jews unable to admit to that loss and thus to make that negativity productive – a space for imagining a future rather than constant recourse to a now fetishized violence and subordination of the past.

If we read Butler as describing a kind of melancholic Judaism, one constituted through a series of disavowals, we might begin to ask more politically textured questions, supplementing Butler’s “bad” Judaism/“good” Jewishness dyad. What populations bear the brunt of melancholic Judaism? Does the internal and external Jewish “pecking order” have different mechanisms? In other words, is the lived experience of a Jew’s confrontation with the “otherness” of a Palestinian similar to or different from the lived experience of a wealthy, American, Ashkenazi Jew, having returned to his $2 million Jerusalem pied-à-terre for one of the pilgrimage holidays and confronting a Yemenite Jewish beggar on the street? Does the Yemenite Jew’s confrontation with a Palestinian have a different phenomenological quality than his confrontation with a group of Ethiopian Jews, protesting their subordination in front of the Knesset? How does

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56 Ibid., p. 119.
57 Butler uses the concept of melancholia to describe Primo Levi’s account of the ways in which the stories we tell to avoid losing memories seem to guarantee rather than prevent memory loss because the stories we tell come to stand in for and thus displace memories, until the more confident we are in the story we tell the more likely it is to be completely detached from its referent (Butler, *Parting ways*, p. 190).
a young Russian–Jewish couple, with no religious commitments whatsoever, who bought a house on settlement land because they couldn’t afford housing elsewhere, confront their Palestinian neighbors? And how different is that ethical scene from the scene of that same couple’s face-to-face encounter with their ultra-Orthodox neighbors, who are living out an ideological commitment to “greater Israel.” None of these people need to agree on the meaning of Judaism or Jewishness, but they do need some way to come together and collectively negotiate the kind of institutional arrangements that their understanding of Judaism and/or Jewishness demands. Butler’s ethics illuminates the need to contest the meaning of Jewishness at sites where appeal to its unity does a certain kind of political work. Perhaps, some of Butler’s critics miss this contribution. What is obscured by Butler’s ethical turn, however, is the near absence of a properly “public” space. In other words, Butler offers no sites of institutional inscription for her ethics. This absence, in turn, shows up in her reading of Arendt and Arendt’s relationship to religion.

In a rather famous and diplomatically vitriolic exchange between Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem upon the publication of Eichmann in Jerusalem, Scholem accused Arendt of lacking “Ahabath Israel” – a love of the Jewish people. Arendt responded that love is what one feels toward specific individuals, not an abstract collective. She goes on to recount a conversation with “a prominent political personality” who claimed that his socialism consists in replacing the “belief” in God with the “belief” in “the Jewish people.” The reply Arendt wishes she had given at the time is as follows: “[...]the greatness of this people was once that it believed in God, and believed in Him in such a way that its trust and love toward Him was greater than its fear. And now this people believes only in itself?” 18 Butler reads this scene as good, old-fashioned idolatry critique, pointing to the ways in which “the Jewish people” have divinized themselves, narcissistically mistaking themselves for God. She also suggests that having “love” for “a people” makes an abstraction of them, the kind of abstraction mobilized by anti-Semitism. Butler further rehearses her ambivalence about Arendt’s concomitant appreciation for and rejection of religion. Butler finds in Arendt some commitment to “good” religion (intellectual, critical, exegetical) and a repudiation of “bad” religion (supernatural, nationalism, communitarian, parochial). 19 But Arendt’s comment may be read in a more politically radical fashion still. In an earlier text, The Human Condition, Arendt describes the “public” space as a kind of table “[...]located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men [sic] at the same time.” 20 The shift from loving God to Ahabath Israel, a shift some might celebrate as “secularization,” is best read as a collapse of that table – that third term between the dyad of me and myself or me and my neighbor around which we articulate the kind of world we want to make, not just the kind of identities we understand ourselves as already having. With nothing to bring us to

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19 Butler, Parting ways, p.122–3.
the table, without the table itself, we are unimaginatively, parasitically stuck, feeding upon our now-internalized losses. Throughout the book, Butler offers exile, a common history of displacement, as a possible and passible object of collective identification. If and when that fails to bring people to the table, Butler places her hope in the imagination-enlarging power of poetry.

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Is Critique Theological?

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One way of understanding the project of critical theory is as a rejection of how we ordinarily understand what there is. How we describe the world, using our everyday concepts, only gets at appearances. Through critical theory, through the process of critique, appearances are shown to be illusory. Therefore, we have a responsibility to critique, following from our responsibility to truthfulness. Critical theory is not committed to a truth behind the appearances, but rather to the rejection of deception – hence a responsibility to truthfulness rather than to truth, as Bernard Williams has put it. Framed in this way, critical theory is at once a philosophical and an ethical project. When the everyday concepts that are subject to scrutiny are understood to be created by the powerful, securing the interests of the powerful, critical theory also becomes a political project, a democratic project.

Judith Butler invites us to engage in the process of critique. She argues that what lies behind apparent objects and individuals, what lies behind what she calls “ontology,” is the social world. We are tempted to believe ourselves to be sovereign subjects perceiving discrete objects, but for Butler this view conceals the way that what we find around us and we ourselves supervene on our lives together. In other words, truthfulness resides in our lives together, in the social world, and ignoring that by, for example, affirming the sovereignty of the subject is necessarily false – and immoral, and undemocratic.

What does the social world mean for Butler, and how can it serve as a resource for critique? In her early work, the social world meant social norms. The subject is constituted by norms, according to Butler, developing this notion from Louis Althusser and, ultimately, from Hegel. There is no subject outside of or prior to social norms. It is not the subject who chooses to act in this way or that; it is the norm, that one ought to act this way or that, which makes the subject. It is not just that we are made by our communities but that the salient aspect of our communities is their normativity, the way we are rewarded for acting in one way and punished for acting in another. Even though we do not pre-exist social norms, those norms still act violently on us, punishing us when we fail to conform. Part of being human is being constituted by social norms but being unable to perfectly follow those norms – so always being vulnerable to violence. Some of us are especially vulnerable, for social norms do not reflect the lives of all members of a community. Social norms reflect the interests of the wealthy and the powerful, or, of whites, of men, of heterosexuals.
Those who do not fit these categories face severe, systematic violence as they continually fail to conform to social norms. Importantly, for Butler it is not simply the abstract subject who is constituted by social norms but also physical objects, most notably bodies. When the violence of social norms is inflicted on the marginalized, it is not only inflicted on their psyches but also on their very flesh.

From the perspective of Butler’s early work, the power of critique is in thematizing the violence of social norms and in opening possibilities for mitigating this violence. The violence of social norms is most acute when they are thought to be timeless, universal, or sacred. When social norms are seen as simply conventions, like literary or artistic conventions, they still carry force but we are granted license for experimentation and innovation that may eventually transform the conventions. Butler famously points to drag as a practice that calls attention to the contingency of gender norms and so reduces the violence faced by those who do not conform to gender norms and encourages creative forms of gender expression that may, one day, radically transform gender norms. Drag is a critical practice, exploring how there are social norms lurking behind the apparently stable world of clear concepts (male, female) – so drag is an ethical, and political, practice.

In *Parting Ways*, Butler reaffirms her commitment to critique as an ethical–political practice of exploring the social world that underlies the everyday world. But in this more recent work, the social world does not mean social norms; it means relationality. In a slogan, “relationality displaces ontology” (5). The sovereign subject, and now the sovereign nation as well, refuse relationality; the work of critique is to expose the relationality concealed, perhaps repressed, by claims to sovereignty. Butler’s paradigmatic example is the Jew whose identity is always formed in relation to the non-Jew. Given the state of Israel’s identity as Jewish, this example applies both to the sovereign subject and to the sovereign state – and it can, Butler implies, extend beyond the case of Israel. When we focus our attention on how we are constituted in relation to each other, the desire to build walls and borders subsides; such a desire is, in Butler’s terminology, based on ontology, and so is false. We must learn “cohabitation,” sharing spaces with others who are different from us while allowing for the ambivalence of that difference, that it is neither absolute nor negligible, and that we are bound to it because we are constituted through it. Relationality, then, is a deep connection with others that has priority over one’s relationship with oneself.

In the concrete case of Israel, the ethical and political implications of Butler’s understanding of critical theory are clear. Affirming Israeli sovereignty is problematic and affirming Palestinian sovereignty is also problematic. Instead, what ought to be affirmed by those committed to critique, by those committed to truthfulness, is binationalism, the cohabitation of land by multiple peoples, Jews, Palestinians, and others. Cohabitation involves emotional tumult: “the longing, the dependency, the constraint, the possibilities for encroachment, impingement and displacement” (176). Cohabitation always involves complex interpersonal and intergroup negotiation, but that complexity continually thwarts the tendency toward uncritical thinking, thwarts the lure of sovereign self and sovereign state. Those who are uncritical believe that they

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can choose with whom to live, with whom to share their world, but this is yet another assertion of sovereignty, resting on the mistaken belief that our everyday concepts correspond in some deep way with how the world really is, was, and will be.

The fascinating, unasked question raised by Butler’s recent work is how her two conceptions of the social world relate to each other. On the surface, relationality and social norms seem to be nearly opposite ways of describing life together. Social norms are impersonal, violently imposed, and serve the interests of the wealthy and powerful, whereas relationality is depicted as the network of complex, emotionally fraught connections between individuals. Butler describes “the recognition of equality that follows from [Arendt’s, and presumably Butler’s] conception of human plurality” (169), a sentiment that would be quite foreign to the social world of norms depicted in Butler’s earlier work. While there is complex emotional work involved in the subject’s relation to social norms (a desire to conform, an impossibility to conform, a frustration with a body that does not conform) and there is a sense of equality before norms (each individual is misrecognized but also has the capacity to own that misrecognition and to attempt to thwart the process of interpellation), there is no sense that subjects can interact with each other unmediated by social norms; even desire is constituted by social norms.

Both of Butler’s conceptions of the social share a tendency toward the synchronic rather than the diachronic. The social is something that exists now, in relationality as it is happening or in the set of social norms that currently hold. It is curious, then, that Butler frames Parting Ways as a critique that appeals to tradition. Indeed, her introduction presents a way of understanding critical theory as an appeal to the social in a third way, conceived of diachronically, as a community that has existed through time. The false appearances of the present can be refused by a practice of critique that recovers forgotten stories and values. This is a much less controversial form of critical theory, for the authority of the past is often a part of the rhetoric of the present. Yet the rhetoric of the present invokes the past rhetorically, imagines the past to be static and monolithic. The critical power of tradition is not only in its dynamism but also in its fissures, in the way that it is always opaque, but the impossible task of discerning meaning from that opacity is a critical practice, a commitment to truthfulness beyond the false appearances of our everyday world.

Butler’s turn toward specifically Jewish tradition is not a turn away from relationality. The essential content of Jewish tradition, Butler argues, is its affirmation of relationality. But it is not clear why tradition and relationality must be distinct. Why do others we relate to need to be geographically proximate rather than temporally proximate? Moreover, although the point is not made explicitly, Butler’s appeal to tradition has force because of the normativity of tradition, because social norms have a reach that is both spatial and temporal. In short, the account of Jewish tradition that Butler begins to develop hints at a way that her accounts of relationality and of social norms might be brought together. Pursuing this approach would offer Butler useful dialog partners because scholars of religious studies and theologians, from a variety of religions, have long reflected on this nexus of tradition, normativity, and relationality. Indeed, this approach implies that critique is not secular, that critique is essentially theological, and that critique only appears secular when its components are disaggregated.
Critique is a commitment to truthfulness, but it is also a commitment to justice. Engagements with Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and with Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” allow Butler to explore this connection, a particularly suggestive one given the current political situation in Israel/Palestine. Justice is not exhausted by following the law properly. Pursuing justice means allowing the social world – in *Parting Ways*, relationality – to stand in judgment of the *status quo*. Laws are illegitimate if they distort or conceal the underlying world of relationality that it is the critic’s task to uncover. In other words, despite her protestations to the contrary, Butler embraces a natural law theory: she affirms that there is a higher law to which we have access through reflection on our human nature which trumps worldly law. For her, this nature is essentially relational, whereas for other natural law theorists it is essentially rational. It is arguable whether natural law theories are necessarily religious, but they certainly have been embraced by religious traditions. Once again, the question arises whether critique, for Butler, might be a theological practice.

What happens to this account of justice, or higher law, when we think relationality together with tradition and social norms? Such appeals beyond the logic of the present would gesture toward, but at the same time refuse to name, the way the world could be otherwise. This, of course, is exactly the task of *Parting Ways*. But what happens when the relationship with otherness takes place in the context of vast, sedimented power inequalities? Here we might think of Blackness in the Euro-American imagination, or Islam in the post-9/11 West, or, crucially, Palestinians in the Jewish imagination. If we confine ourselves to thinking relationality spatially, we are tempted by a too-easy equality that embraces the struggle and love of proximate others based simply on geography, on cohabitation. But if we think relationality spatially and temporally, as part of a tradition, and if we further consider the normativity of that tradition, the poetry of shared complication with which *Parting Ways* ends can seem rather trite. Just as there are Jewish resources for the critique of the state of Israel, the weight of that Jewish tradition is brought to the encounter between the Israeli and the Palestinian individuals, or lovers. While Butler, drawing on Darwish, portrays this love as painfully complex, might it not instead be abusive? Where the abuser and abused see complexity, see tenderness and hurt and forgiveness, the outsider sees a grotesque power inequality and continual, unavoidable manipulation. What is needed to stop abuse is not probing the complexities of love but rather appealing beyond the relationship, beyond relationality. Perhaps such a critical appeal is, once again, theological.

Notes on contributor

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I am most appreciative of the engagement with *Parting Ways*, and thankful to Vincent Lloyd for organizing this discussion.

I am struck first by the fact that the respondents seem not to agree with one another about what the book is about, its basic claims and proposals. I am sure that it must be partially a fault or failure of the book that accounts for the fact that its arguments can be represented in such an inconsistent way. Butler is apparently in favor of an ethics of dispersion, disidentification, or relationality, I am not sure which one. Butler is herself a melancholic or embracing a melancholic Judaism. Butler is not a melancholic, but a utopian. Jewish philosophy or perhaps social ontology offers a cure for political conflict, or perhaps it is responsible for that conflict. Butler is in favor of bi-nationalism, or she finds it wretched. Perhaps I should simply issue a public apology for producing a book whose claims are not as clear as they should be or that has created more confusion than clarity. But perhaps it is equally true that, on issues such as these – Jewishness, Israel, Zionism, philosophy, and the future – it is difficult to read without blurred vision, or difficult to hear without selective forms of editing. After all, if one reads the text looking to assimilate its contents to what one already expects from a position critical of Israel, then one does not really read, but skims or focuses on the words that seem to confirm a prior understanding. I confess that there is a great deal going on in this text, perhaps too much. And it saddens me that the readings of Arendt and Benjamin, even Levi, have been sidelined in favor of broader polemics. My aim in writing such a book was to try to establish a tone for discussions that tend to bring up anguish and rage for any number of people. So I was glad to see that whatever the criticisms offered here, they did not sound like threats and accusations. So perhaps we should all modestly congratulate ourselves in advance for trying to have a conversation at all.

**Zionism**

There is a difference between saying (a) that all Zionism is settler colonialism and is nothing other than settler colonialism, (b) that every form of political Zionism that...
accepts the principle of Jewish sovereignty as the basis of state formation accepts inequality and dispossession, both of which are managed by state policies and procedures characterized as settler colonialism, and (c) that various forms of Zionism, considered historically, have various views on the principle of Jewish sovereignty and are neither identical with one another nor fully reducible to settler colonialism. It is clearly true that Parting Ways does not adequately consider all the variations of Zionism articulated in the early part of the twentieth century, though some subsequent work I have undertaken on Martin Buber has sought to compensate for that limitation. The principle of Jewish political sovereignty is not a “fantasy” but a well-established foundation of the Israeli state, debated prior to 1948 and installed as a reigning political principle since that time. It is distinguished from forms of bi-nationalism that would imply shared sovereignty. I am opposed to the former, and I am in favor of the latter, following Arendt’s views on federated authority and the critique of political sovereignty, especially when it enshrines the rights and demographic advantage for one people over another on the same land.

Melancholia

Melancholia is a condition elaborated by Freud in Mourning and Melancholia, which characterizes the failure to avow that something has been lost. That disavowal works in complex ways. One can claim that the object is not really gone, and sustain a “magical” relation to its continuing existence. That form of disavowal usually involved incorporating features of the lost person object, or ideal into oneself. Or one could refuse to acknowledge that there ever was an attachment, a love, or a relation, at which point one claims not only that “I have lost nothing” but also that “nothing was ever there to lose.” My own views on melancholia were elaborated in two different contexts. The first occurrence was in the analysis of gender melancholia, in which I sought to understand the cultural prevalence of the denial of homosexual attachment in accounts of gender development. That disavowal not only happened in the formation of gendered subjects but also in the theory and popular discourse that governed our understanding of how boys become men and girls become women. I sought to expose and criticize that form of melancholia as a form of disavowal, and offered a queer critique of that explanatory scheme in order to show the broader workings of melancholia, and the ways in which it reflected a general failure to recognize the importance of the diversity of ways of loving that characterize embodied human life from its inception.

The second context was again concerned to expose a failure to recognize a loss, specifically, the failure to grasp a population as “grievable” in the context of war. I asked why certain lives were treated as mournable and others lives were treated as not mournable, under what frameworks that appeared to be true, how those frameworks, mainly nationalist and racist, could be effectively criticized.

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The normative principle guiding that form of criticism is that all lives should be treated as equally grievable, that is, equally valuable, and ought to be safeguarded on an equal basis and in equal ways. In my view, this principle is one that affirms the equal distribution of value to human life. Although formulated first in relation to US forms of grieving and war-making in the aftermath of 9/11 (Precarious Life,3 Frames of War4), it also pertains to Israel/Palestine.

Of course, I do not claim anywhere in Parting Ways that Jewishness is melancholic or that Zionism is melancholic. I do suggest that extending equal value to Jewish and non-Jewish lives is imperative. I cite Primo Levi to that effect, and appreciate very much his ethical expansiveness in this regard, even when pressed on the question of whether “Jewish blood” was not most important to him, to which he responded by claiming all blood was the same. I understand that it can be fun, in that slightly sadistic way, to cite Wendy Brown to criticize Judith Butler, or to do the opposite, but Brown’s idea of wounded attachment bears a closer resemblance to that “defensive” and “arelational” position that I also criticize than my cunning critic allows. To understand this, I have to explain better what I mean by “relationality,” which I will do in the section “Relational Ethics” below. It is my view that the open and public grieving of all lives provides conditions for affirming and extending the value of life. I take this to be one of the central meanings of the Kaddish, the mourning prayer, and of the social rituals of mourning within Judaism according to which all loss requires a public gathering and acknowledgment. One might understand the Kaddish prayer and the practice of sitting shiva as a quite savvy way to ward off the perils of melancholia.

Jewish/non-Jewish

It is not my view that Jewishness is a site of disidentification. I am interested in José Muñoz’s work, but that framework bears little resemblance to the project I have undertaken in this context. I am asking two sorts of questions that take up the Jewish/Non-Jewish question. First, when I criticize the state of Israel, am I criticizing that state as a Jewish person. After all, I am a Jewish person, and that is not really debatable. But do I understand and designate the position from which I criticize that state as a Jewish position. One the one hand, I do identify in that way and organize my political views partially in relation to that form of belonging. I belong to Jewish Voice for Peace, and it is important to me to belong to a Jewish organization that shares and supports many of my views, and where I can support others who have taken positions that potentially ostracize them from some parts of the Jewish community. But am I “totalized” by my position as a Jew? In fact, many of the arguments I make are made by others who are not Jewish, and they have to do with fundamental convictions that are shared regarding equal rights of citizenship, democratic politics, and international law. So I am not fully and exhaustively defined as a Jew when I make such criticisms. And some of the criticisms I make are not particular “Jewish” criticisms. They are arguments that

anyone can make who believe in certain basic principles of democratic that entail an inclusive practice of self-rule. At any given moment, is it possible to say “from what position” I am speaking? And do I always have to be speaking “from an identity position” when I speak about such matters? And are my reasons for taking the views that I do “Jewish” reasons, or are only some of them drawn from Jewish ethical and political writings, and others not?

My point is not that I “dis-identify” with Jewishness nor that I see Jewishness as a “site of disidentification.” No at all. My point is that every “identification” is always partial, and so does not fully describe everything about what a person is or why and how she thinks as she does. In other words, Jewishness is invariably in the mix of who I am and what I think, but who I am is not really a single identity, and my wager is that “you” – whoever you are – are not fully and finally identified by a single social or religious category. Does this mean that I deny or disavow my Jewishness? No. It means that I accept it as part of the mix that I am and that I presume you do the same with the social categories that define you without fully exhausting the meaning of what you are. In fact, it would be an error to say that as a Jew I can only defend the lives of Jewish people, or defend Jewish people against hatred. I think that such a position makes Jewish ethics into a concern only with Jews, but not with non-Jews. One of my questions is whether there is an ethical relation to the non-Jew that is articulated within the Jewish tradition. Another question is how I myself might bring Jewish and Palestinian ethical and political thinking into contact with one another to see what grounds there are for thinking about a viable form of co-habitation. My efforts to write with and against Levinas, Benjamin, Arendt, and Levi are part of the first effort; my efforts to bring Levinas into contact with Said, and to consider the difficult vision of co-habitation in Darwish are part of the latter.

My defense of shared sovereignty as a political principle follows directly from my efforts to think about forms of ethical relationality that assume that I live not just for myself and for others who are like me but also for others with whom I co-habit the earth, regardless of whether they share my religion or my language. My conviction is that ethical principles such as these can serve as the utopic horizon within which political proposals can be considered. Co-habitation has to be thought outside of the terms of settler colonialism, and since that time is not yet quite thinkable within present experience, we need imaginary experiments, such as those enacted by political poetry, to start to think what a non-wretched form of bi-nationalism might be. Bi-nationalism is only wretched if it confirms and reproduces the status quo of colonial inequality. A bi-nationalism based on substantive equality would be non-wretched and most felicitous.

Relational Ethics

Following Levinas, each of us is obligated to respond to an ethical demand that comes to us not from within ourselves, but from the outside. In his language, it is the “face” of the other that makes this demand. The “face” indicates the exposed or vulnerable dimension of a living being, a being that deserves to be safeguarded against harm, and ought not to be killed. Of course, Levinas’ position has been
criticized for not supplying a way to distinguish among the many demands, sometimes conflicting, that are made upon us in this way. My view is that his ethical position only makes sense if we resituate it within a political framework that defends the principle of the equal grievability of lives. In my view, building upon but supplementing Levinas, we are obligated to regard all lives as equally grievable. Of course, that view leaves open the following questions: who is regarded as having a face, or whose face is visible and audible? And which lives are included in “all lives”? Are animals, for instance, included? When does life begin or end? What about the ethical obligation to the non-living?

These are all good questions, deserving of further inquiry. But I am not sure they can be answered through recourse to formal principles alone. For Levinas, the ethical relation is “an-archic” in a rather specific sense, since prior to any recourse to principle or law, I am affected by another whose potential or actual suffering obligates me in relation to that other. This means that prior to any question of “who I am” or even self-identity, I am in relation to others, and defined, in his words, “pre-ontologically” by that relation. Although we tend to say that “I am in an ethical relation to this other, over there,” the grammar mistakenly installs the “I” as prior to, and separate from, the relation itself. For Levinas, the relation is primary, and this “I” emerges only in the course of responding to this other. Bound to the other from the start, this “I” is not really thinkable without this relation to the other, the one who is not-me, and whose life nevertheless becomes my responsibility.

I work time and again with this non-egological concept of ethical relationality. I believe it is most useful for thinking about how to live on terms of equality across religious, racial, and national differences. That can only happen, however, if we submit the asymmetry of the ethical relation to the radical reciprocity of political egalitarianism. That is my goal, even if it means falling out with some Levinasians and offending the sensibilities of some radical democratic theorists.

Martin Buber was one who also maintained a relational concept of ethics, one derived from the very important Jewish notion of the “covenant.” Although his views are very different from Levinas, we can nevertheless find in his writings an important view of ethical relationality that resonated with his early and open defense of political bi-nationalism for Palestine.

In 1929, for instance, Buber wrote an essay entitled “Zionism and Nationalism” in which he tried to distinguish the one from the other. Although that essay has its limitations, it does include the following imaginary dialogue with a nationalist: “You might object: if we do not participate in the necessary politics of power, how can we secure ourselves? How will we secure this Volksland in Palestine?” To this I reply,

No conceivable security is as real as this: to become a power in spirit that can sustain the forms of life among the nations, that can become a living example of relations between the nations, that can help prepare a true covenant between Orient and Occident and from there, on the basis of this work, form an alliance with the future elements of all nations. (MBR, 278)

5 Buber M. Zionism and nationalism (1929).
Consider the difficult balance conveyed by Buber’s statement, namely, the idea of “a living example of relations between the nations.” In other words, he is not speaking about an exemplary nation, but a living example of a set of relations, suggesting that what is most living and most exemplary is inter-relationship. He shifts the emphasis from the nation to its inter-relations, and in that sense stands for what we might call “the between” of nations. Bi-nationalism, in this view, is not the simply conjoining of one nation with others, but the active and exemplary enactment of the relation that holds between them.

Poetry and Refugees

It is a curious thought experiment to imagine Jewish Studies scholars trying to discern what was said at an American Academy of Religion (AAR) conference. Did the anti-Zionist make an inadvertent Zionist confession? How very thrilling! It is no secret that I grew up within a very strongly Zionist household and community, and that “I come from there.” Formations such as these are very difficult to break with, and I have spent a fair amount of time wondering about “breaking” and whether it can ever be absolute. If I break with all that formed me, what would be left of me? For some time, I have argued that we cannot simply emancipate ourselves from those traditions and norms that form us, and that for me, religion was part of my subject formation, and continues to be important to me. Sometimes I can give reasons for that importance, but sometimes I cannot. It works in me, and through me. The point I was making at the AAR is the same point I sought to make through recourse to Darwish’s poetry. Said has been my guide here, since he is the one who noted that there is a diasporic dimension of Judaism that has sought time and again to establish affiliations (not “disidentifications”) with the dispossessed, those who are refugees, those who have been persecuted or lost their homes. It makes sense that there should be such alliances, given the horrific history of anti-Semitism persecution (one that continues now in Europe with the rise of anti-Semitism from several sources). Yes, it makes sense that the Jewish people have to look out for themselves, but it makes equal sense that the Jewish people would establish bonds of political solidarity with the dispossessed and the persecuted. It is this latter ethic, one Said calls diasporic, that I have sought to foreground. Primo Levi represents this in the most compelling way.

The question I sought to pose was whether this diasporic understanding of the equally unacceptable character of all dispossession and persecution could be brought to bear on thinking a new political form for Israel/Palestine. Concretely, this would involve developing a new and consistent approach to the rights of refugees. The political discussion at the heart of the chapter on Darwish’s poetry has to do with the fact that the Law of Return that secures the rights of sanctuary for all Jews (defined in specific legal ways) in Israel contradicts the policy of dispossession and expulsion that has produced now more than five million Palestinians dispossessed, a large number of whom are still living without citizenship or rights of mobility. My point at AAR is the same as the one I make here (and in the book): if we understand the rights of Jewish refugees to sanctuary, this means that we object to the status of any people being deprived of rights of belonging (in Arendt’s terms), of rights to place, and we
defend rights to be relieved of statelessness. If we hold to that latter principle, and we agree that it must be universalized, then it follows that Palestinian refugees also have a “right of return,” which means either a right to return to the areas they were made to flee, or a right to a state where they can have full rights of citizenship, or rights to be relieved of a refugee status wherever they are living (I am mindful of the desperate situation of Palestinians in Lebanese refugee camps now infiltrated by IS members, as I write this). Does it not make sense to develop a consistent refugee policy that would honor and institute rights of refugees, including the rights of Jews and Palestinians? I do not know any “liberal Zionists” who agree that the right of return for Palestinians should be regarded as equal to any rights of sanctuary that Jews should have. But the development of such a policy would certainly challenge the anti-democratic policy of maintaining demographic majority for Jews in Israel/Palestine. It would also establish a principle of political equality that would have implications for any further efforts to establish a polity based on principles of equality, non-discrimination, full citizenship, and the end to the practices of expulsion and dispossession that characterize the contemporary settler colonial politics of Israel.

My views on relational ethics, co-habitation, the covenant, equal grievability, bi-nationalism beyond colonialism, and political egalitarianism draw from Jewish and non-Jewish sources, are quite basic and abiding: as well, I hope to see a world in which Jews and non-Jews live on terms of equality and non-violence in that region. It is a “mixed” lineage and “mixed” future, one that depends that we think beyond Jewish claims to political sovereignty and toward practicable forms of bi-nationalism for a diverse population.

I do not break with tradition in making these claims, but I do see that traditions only reproduce themselves, and stay alive, when they adapt to new circumstances. Sometimes an older doctrine becomes vibrant again when it comes into contact with a new historical demand. Benjamin thought this about translation, noting that a text has to break with its conditions of production and find an “afterlife” in new historical circumstances. It was that contact with another language that animated the messianic sparks within the first language, suggesting that both the language of the first text and the language of the translation should ideally both be altered in the process. For Benjamin, that older text comes alive again when it comes in contact with a linguistic circumstance that could not have been anticipated. A form of “understanding” or “communicability” is established by that encounter that he calls translation. Can something similar happen when, working in a comparative way, we bring Jewish and Palestinian perspectives together that show foreground affinities against the background of stark opposition?

In my view, I do not think that tradition is distinct from norms, nor do I see “critique” as operating in some unsituated space and time. Just as we struggle with the formations that have made our lives possible (and challenging), so we struggle with those intellectual resources that have made our thinking possible. I would not have entered philosophical thinking without Buber or Spinoza, and Levinas, Arendt, and Benjamin have accompanied me for years. I do not, cannot, leave them behind without losing something crucial about myself, my thinking, the conditions of my own tentative and partial self-understanding. But if I tarry with, or care for, only those traditions that confirm my already existing sense of self, or engage only with
those who are like me, or who resemble me, who tell the same stories and have the
same jokes, who went to the same synagogues, and read the same texts, then do I
sacrifice something of that very ethical tradition? For that tradition compels me to
respond to traditions outside of me, to leave the circumference of my own sphere
of belonging, not to “deny” or “dis-identify” but to live out the ethical demand to
respond to otherness. Indeed, what finally compels me to respond to conditions of
dispossessed living that are emphatically beyond my zone of familiarity? Is it an
ethical and a political practice that is formed at least partially through Judaism. This
form of ethics does not require love or unity or even harmony. It can be difficult, even
aversive, but it remains an obligatory demand to preserve or safeguard the lives of
creatures whose transience and vulnerability is equal to my own. When Arendt
claimed that Eichmann erred when he thought he could choose with whom to
cohabit the earth, she established the principle that none of us have the right
to choose who may live and who may die. If we reject that obligation, we are at risk of
condoning genocide. We are obligated to live with those we never chose, and to
endeavor to produce a political world in which co-habitation on the basis of equality
becomes thinkable and livable.

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