

existence of a Jewish state as a no-go zone, since all other particular identity groups around the world (from the Swedes to the Palestinians) seem to be accorded the privilege of self-determination in principle. The problem isn't whether there must be red lines or cannot ever be red lines, but rather what are the parameters and boundaries of discourse to which we feel entitled, and who gets to draw those lines. Loyalty and dissent are not absolutes, but describe a continuum along which various positions are possible.

In that spirit, I offer the following as a practical — if difficult to measure — guide as to what might be considered permissible or reasonable dissent:

1. Bedfellows and relativity: If you find yourself collecting new friends (or funds) as part of your commitment to dissent, ask yourself whether your supporters are helping you on the merits of your case, or on the grounds of self-interest. Check whether they demand similar freedom of dissent within their own ranks.

Finally, if your new friends seem to make political hay out of your stated positions, how well are you prepared to reply to them?

2. Civil disobedience or “courage”: Dissent in an authoritarian society poses a risk of political and personal danger. Dissent in a democracy rarely if ever carries such a risk factor, and it is wise to distinguish clearly between the two situations. But even in a democracy, some acts of dissent can come with a price tag of ostracism or legal penalty. Civil disobedience works by virtue of dissidents' willingness to violate limits and be penalized for it. Under the duress of social pressure, ostracism, or boycott, is your opinion still worth expressing? If your dissent involves no risk factor to yourself, ask yourself whom else you may be asking to undertake responsibility for your risk.

3. “Die Gedanken sind frei.” [“My thoughts are free.”]: That is for the good of all. But how well have you considered that you may be wrong? 

Hannah Arendt, Gershom Scholem, and the Ethics of Collective Responsibility

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“In the Jewish tradition there is a concept, hard to define and yet concrete enough, which we know as Ahavat Israel: ‘Love of the Jewish people...’ In you, dear Hannah, as in so many intellectuals who came from the German Left, I find little trace of this.”¹

The time: June 1963. The place: Jerusalem. The author: the philosopher and Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem. The addressee: the philosopher Hannah Arendt in New York. The background: the so-called Eichmann controversy, sparked by Arendt's polemical book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, covering the trial of the Nazi war criminal, subtitled *A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

Rivers of ink have been spilled in an attempt to explain what exactly Arendt meant by the term “banality of evil,” how this idea is to be framed within a larger setting of Arendtian thought, and what we can learn about Holocaust memory from this dispute. Many of today's communal disputes appear minute in comparison to the controversy Arendt's book sparked when she touched upon what was until then a taboo. Merciless in her criticisms of Jewish leaders, she not only argued that they had played an active role in the destruction process, but she also had no problem

formulating an insulting moral equation of victims and persecutors — not to mention the fact that she enjoyed exploiting the opportunity of Eichmann's trial to sting Zionist institutions and ideology. Scholem was, therefore, not upset without reason. It is interesting, though, that Scholem, at least as he argued, was not repelled so much by the historical “empirical” inaccuracies that Arendt's book contained, as much as by the brutal tone of her accusations. How, Scholem argued, can we comprehend this unwillingness to empathize with Jews who were placed in impossible conditions? What can explain the poisonous arrows Arendt sent at her brethren, especially in such catastrophic times? And above all: How should we demarcate the limits of “kosher” intracommunal criticism?

Scholem could not understand Arendt's critique as anything but a symptom of Jewish self-hatred, inspired by her youthful Marxism — both of which he considered byproducts of twisted assimilated Jewry. Arendt, deeply of-

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¹ Quoted from Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, edited by Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978) pp. 241-2.

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fended, replied in an open letter of her own. She focused on the idea of love, arguing “I have never in my life ‘loved’ any people or collective, neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed love ‘only’ my friends and the only kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons.”²

Preserving public spaces for deliberation is, according to this post-Holocaust philosophy, the only way to strengthen collectiveness.

Arendt and Scholem both understood that there is nothing “instinctive” and “natural” about life in a civil society where almost infinite numbers of individuals seek to endow meaning to their lives. They differed, though, in the solutions they offered to the problem. Arendt feared that romanticist language about collectivity would open the door to totalitarianism; when individual opinions are suppressed in the name of an imagined collective kinship, she believed, there are strong reasons to become worried. Both her own personal history and her philosophical revolt against Martin Heidegger, the pro-Nazi philosopher who was also her ex-teacher and ex-lover, informed her thinking. For her, Heidegger’s way of thinking, “drawn on mythologizing and muddled concepts like ‘folk’ and ‘earth’ in an effort to supply his isolated selves with a shared, common ground to stand on,”³ was the best philosophical support the Nazi totalitarian takeover could receive.

Scholem’s biggest mistake, I believe, was that he assumed Arendt was doing something else: speaking in the name of an abstract humanity with which she identified against a particular community to which she “actually” belonged. A conceptual dichotomy, separating universal humanism from ethnonational particularism, was (as it still is) a familiar weapon frequently used by many critics of Zionism. The departure point of many proponents of the universalism-vs.-particularism thesis was that Jewry was not only too narrow, too archaic, and too constricting, but also that it restricted one’s ability to freely exercise his or her rationality and act morally because morals are, effectively, universal. As years passed, this universal/particular dichotomy practically turned into a cliché. A classic example of the use of this powerful rhetorical weapon can be found in Isaac Deutscher’s influential essay “The Non-Jewish Jew,” in which he made Spinoza, Heine, Marx,

Rosa Luxemburg, Freud, and Trotsky part of a heroic tradition of Jewish heretics, functioning, in his words, as “the *akher*” (“the outsider” or “the other”). What made these secular prophets so insightful, Deutscher argued, is exactly the fact that they could not “reconcile themselves to ideas which were nationally or religiously limited and induced them to strive for a universal *Weltanschauung* [worldview].”⁴ Had the Eichmann controversy already exploded, Deutscher would likely have added Arendt to his list of brave dissidents. And given this fashionable climate of ideas, as well as Scholem’s lack of patience for universalism — which he identified with German-Jewish “assimilationist” zeal — we can probably understand why Scholem erred in associating Arendt with the Marxist-internationalist flank.

Arendt’s political philosophy, in my reading, does not fall into this universal-vs.-particular trap, and thus it would be utterly erroneous and anachronistic to categorize Arendt as a “non-Jewish Jew” whose critique was extra- or non-Jewish. Her debate with Scholem and others is a debate *within* the same house, and like all family disputes, this is what intensifies the fire. Arendt, rather than speaking of “family,” “brotherhood,” or “peoplehood” spoke in the name of *communitas*. In an attempt to provide an alternative to Heidegger, Arendt found herself returning to Aristotle and the notion that humans are by nature *zōon politikon*, political animals, who live in communities and need to exercise their political membership by active participation in community. The community Arendt saw in front of her resembled the ancient Greek *polis* or an ancient forum, where citizens gather to express and debate their opinions. Preserving public spaces for deliberation is, according to this post-Holocaust philosophy, the only way to strengthen collectiveness. If a community no longer tolerates dispute and polemic, if it ostracizes its critics, it runs the danger of losing not only its viability but the essential component that constitutes it as a community. This collective citizenship requires collective responsibility, not collective consent.

When speaking of the four children of Israel, the Passover Haggadah defines the “Rasha,” the wicked son, as the one who mockingly asks: “What is this service to you?” The Haggadah quickly explains that what turns him into a wicked person is not the fact that he questioned the consensus, but the fact that he says “to you,” but not to us; “by thus excluding

² Ibid., p. 246.

³ Arendt, “What Is Existential Philosophy?” (1946), in Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, edited by Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1994), on pp. 181-2.

⁴ Isaac Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays*, edited by Tamara Deutscher (London, New York [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 1968). The essay was originally written in 1958.

himself from the community, he has denied that which is fundamental.” There is an all too prevailing tendency to define critics as “wicked sons” and thus to create a dangerous moral equation that makes provocative rhetorical devices part of a great moral evil.

Many of our critics, however, are not wicked like the Haggadah’s “Rasha,” but speak from within a Jewish collectiveness, without excluding themselves and rendering themselves

outsiders. They are vocal, active citizens participating in the forum. Many of them foster greater self-reflection, fight political apathy and escapism, and insist on deliberation that enriches the communal life. Confrontational as some may be, they make communal life vibrant and relevant. Ostracism should be, in such cases, a last resort, exactly because a community has more to lose from the excommunication than the subject it sends into exile. 

Heresy: Baruch Spinoza

STEVEN NADLER

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) is the most famous heretic in Jewish history. When he was ostracized in 1656 by the Portuguese-Jewish community of Amsterdam for his “monstrous deeds” and “abominable heresies,” he is alleged to have said, “They do nothing that I would not have done on my own.” For the remainder of his life, Spinoza seems to have had no residual sense of Jewish identity. Indeed, he was highly critical of Judaism, as well as of other sectarian religions. In his subsequent philosophical writings, he argued that Jewish law and ceremony have, with the destruction of the Temple, lost their *raison d’être*; that there is no metaphysical or moral sense in which Jews are different from other individuals, much less God’s “chosen people”; and that the Bible does not literally have a divine origin but is a work of human literature, composed by unlearned prophets distinguished above all by their particularly vivid imaginations.

For these reasons, Spinoza represents for some the destroyer of Judaism, an enemy from within. But for others, Spinoza is a Jewish hero, the first secular Jew and a thinker who envisioned a liberated and modernized Judaism that does not demand rigorous observance of its laws and rituals.

As attractive a figure as Spinoza has been to various religious, political, and social reform movements over the centuries, it is however a mistake to see him as someone who advocated a secularized Jewish life. Spinoza, in fact, believed that without the laws of the Torah and belief in divine election (as well as the rite of circumcision), the Jewish people have no sustaining source of difference and identity. Thus, for him, the notion of a secular Jew, a Jew without faith and observance, would be incoherent.

In the *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670), Spinoza considers the question of how the Jews have survived over so many centuries as a people, despite no longer having a commonwealth and being scattered over all the nations of the world. What distinguishes Jews? The answer, he writes, is not that God chose and favored Jews, but that Jews “have separated themselves from other nations ... through external rites.” Indeed, he notes that were the

Spinoza represents the first secular citizen, someone for whom religious affiliation and loyalty play no role in his self-identity.

Jews to give up those rites and the observance of Jewish law, political assimilation would lead to total assimilation and Jewish identity would disappear. He cites the case of the Babylonian exiles. “They turned their back on the entire Mosaic Law, consigned to oblivion the laws of their native land as being obviously pointless, and began to be assimilated to other nations.” In other words, the result of secularity and assimilation is not secular and assimilated Jews; it is secular and assimilated individuals who have left their Judaism behind.

For Spinoza, any sectarian religious group is defined solely by its observance of a particular set of laws and rituals. In contrast, partisans of what he calls the “true religion,” are defined not by ceremonial observance but by the inner commitment to what he calls the “divine law” — that is, a simple set of basic moral principles that can be summed up by the proposition: “Love God and your fellow human being.”

Thus, Judaism without an observance of its textually and historically defined tenets, laws, and ceremonies would be an empty shell, a masquerade. Of course, Spinoza had great contempt for traditional sectarian religions, and Judaism

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