

Editorial Reflections on *The Jewish Writings*

Remarks delivered at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, on the occasion of the publication of the Hebrew translation of *The Jewish Writings*
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Ron H. Feldman

I am so happy to be here at the Van Leer Institute to participate in this symposium in celebration of the Hebrew translation of *The Jewish Writings*, which I co-edited with Jerome Kohn, and which was published in the United States by Schocken in 2007. This collection comes 30 years after *The Jew as Pariah*, a smaller collection that I edited, published by Grove Press in 1978. I would like to share some reflections on the over 30-year editorial journey I have taken with Hannah Arendt's Jewish writings, including my earlier effort to have this work translated into Hebrew. My hope is that these reflections will be more than a merely personal report, that they will help illuminate the intellectual and political currents that led to my interest in Arendt's work, and the interest in her work in Israel today, almost 35 years later.

I was last at Van Leer in December 1997, when I attended a three-day conference on Hannah Arendt organized by Professor Steve Aschheim of the Hebrew University.¹ The Van Leer conference was probably the beginning of the road toward the Hebrew version of *The Jewish Writings* because it indicated a change in Israeli attitudes toward Arendt, who had become unwelcome after her publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in 1963. To recall the controversy over Arendt's report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann: what upset a chorus of detractors was her assertion that during the Holocaust Jewish leaders throughout Europe "cooperated in one way or another, for one reason or another, with the Nazis."² As put by her one-time friend, the historian Gershom Scholem, "We are asked, it appears, to confess that the Jews, too, had their 'share' in these acts of genocide."³ Arendt clarified her position by saying that the tragedy of the Jewish leaders was that they "were *not* traitors or Gestapo agents and *still* they became the tools of the Nazis."⁴ The Israeli establishment was also upset with her because she criticized the conduct of the prosecution and its effort to turn the trial into a show trial about the horrors of the Holocaust, not the guilt or innocence of Eichmann the person. Lost in all this fury was the fact that, despite her criticism, Arendt agreed that Israel had the right to try Eichmann, and with the verdict, that he should be hanged.

The legacy of the controversy contains a double irony: for Ben-Gurion it is ironic that Arendt's report is still read and is the main way that the Eichmann

trial is remembered today. For Arendt the legacy is equally ironic because, despite her criticism of the trial, she has become Ben-Gurion's long-term publicist for the main message of the trial, which was to show the world the horrors of the Holocaust. Still, she was labeled a self-hating Jew; she became, to use one of her favorite terms, a "pariah" among the New York Jewish intelligentsia, and was subjected to a contemporary social form of excommunication.

Given the negative view of Arendt in the mainstream Jewish community, I think my interest in her work was facilitated by my distance in time and place from New York and Israel. I grew up in Los Angeles during the 1960s and attended the University of California at Santa Cruz in the mid-1970s—as far away (both literally and figuratively) from those centers of the Jewish establishment as you could get in the continental United States. By living in California I was far less impacted, impressed, or limited in my thinking by what happened in New York or Israel. In addition, the professors I had as my advisors—David Biale and J. Peter Euben—were also outside of this circle.

I came of age in Los Angeles during the post-Six-Day War era, when Israel had a very positive image and was a source of pride and positive identity for American Jews. I first visited Israel in 1968 on a family trip when I was 13, and I was fascinated by the people, the history, and the landscape. While Zionism had been a minority position among American and world Jewry before World War II, the Holocaust convinced the vast majority to support the Zionist position advocating a Jewish State. Still, only after the Six-Day War did the interests and situations of the American and Israeli Jewish communities converge and crystallize into a secular civil religion for contemporary Jews.

I think this redemptive mythic framework can be condensed into one commandment: *Remember the Holocaust and Support Israel*.⁵ This both described and prescribed what it meant to be a "good" Jew—and not just to Jews, but to non-Jews as well. If you didn't keep kosher or observe the Sabbath you were an unobservant Jew; if you spoke critically of Israel or of Jewish memorialization of the Holocaust you were a "self-hating" Jew. Arendt's views, of course, were in the vanguard of violating the simplistic versions of both of these articles of faith.

This paradigm was already a central part of Israel's civil religion, as manifested in a multitude of museums (such as Yad Vashem, Yad Mordechai and Lohamei Haghetat) and in the juxtaposition of the newly created holidays of Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Memorial Day), which precedes Yom HaAtzmaut (Independence Day) by one week. What the perceived threat to Israel's survival leading up to the Six-Day War crystallized was a widespread American Jewish adoption of this Israeli / Zionist mythos, which resulted in Israel becoming a much larger focus of American Jewish pride and identity. The

continuous crises and news from the Middle East—especially the wars of 1967 and 1973, plus the Entebbe rescue in 1976—became catalysts for fund-raising, volunteering, and Jewish pride. The support of American Jews for Israel also facilitated political integration into America, not only because of Israel's positive image as a small democratic country of tough Jews struggling against the Arabs—the biblical metaphor of David vs. Goliath was often used—but also because this image fit in with the Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union, which supported the Arabs. Simply put, the Jews and Israel were on America's side.

It is important to keep in mind that the American Jewish turn toward Israel at that time had more to do with what was going on in the United States than in Israel. Since their arrival in the United States, Jews had become acceptable because they had successfully argued that they were religiously Jewish and patriotically American. By the 1960s, this argument had seen some success, and antisemitic discrimination was diminished—just in time for the American political crisis of the 1960s, when the Vietnam War and Watergate taught Americans to be distrustful of authority and government. The counterculture, environmentalism, and feminism were on the rise, with many Jews disproportionately prominent in these movements. The assimilationist ideology of America as a melting pot was also tatters, with urban riots accompanied by the rise of movements for ethnic pride and power, especially in the African American and Latino communities. One aspect of these developments was the breakdown of the earlier civil rights movement partnership between liberal Jews and African Americans. Jewish Americans, who had some success at being accepted as “white people” with a different religion (Hebrews rather than Christians) began to wonder whether they were a religion or an ethnic group; the positive image of Israel as a modern, secular, and militarily successful country added a positive impetus to the “ethnic” side of this choice. Also enhancing the ethnic side was the rise of Holocaust awareness and education, which taught that Jews were victims of a racial ideology that paid no heed to religious affiliation.

My early interest in Hannah Arendt's Jewish writings should be understood in the context of this era. I wanted to find an undergraduate senior thesis topic that would allow me to critically address the two key events of 20th-century Jewish history and politics, namely the Holocaust and the State of Israel. A friend suggested that I read Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*, which in turn led me to her other books and my discovery of many uncollected and forgotten essays published in the 1940s. My timing was such that I began this research in 1976, less than a year after Arendt died in December 1975. I therefore never had a chance to meet her, which meant that my concentration

on her work was not influenced by any personal contact or allegiance, but only by my study of her published writings.

My interest in Arendt was—and still is—political and philosophical, not personal. Perhaps this is why I find the whole discussion of Arendt's relationship and affair with Heidegger—revealed after I had published *The Jew as Pariah*—so beside the point. What mattered to me were Arendt's ideas about Jewish political issues. In particular, I found that she addressed many topics that still spoke to me a generation later, including her emphasis on the concept of the Jewish people and their struggle for liberation during World War II and its aftermath, in the context of other such movements.

Arendt was an advocate of Jewish pride and severely critical of assimilationists. She formulated this in a comparison of the Jewish “pariah”—perhaps an outsider, but proud of who they were—as against the “parvenu,” who sought to gain social acceptance by denying or minimizing their Jewish roots. This last was most scathingly expressed in the conclusion to her review of Stephan Zweig's autobiography, published after his suicide: “For honor never will be won by the cult of success or fame, by the cultivation of one's own self, nor even by personal dignity. From the ‘disgrace’ of being a Jew there is but one escape—to fight for the honor of the Jewish people as a whole.”⁶

Reading Arendt was part of the process of developing my Jewish identity, a particular case of a wider search for meaning among my generational cohort. I use the term “cohort” to indicate that I was not alone in my opinions and experience, but I do not mean to suggest that these were typical or common to American Jews of my generation. We were critical of the spiritually empty Judaism of the post-World War II suburbs, and the efforts of Jewish leadership aimed at assuring the acceptance of “Rosh Hashanah Jews” into the American mainstream.

One trend, influenced by the spiritual awakenings of the counterculture, searched for more authentic religious experience and resulted in a spectrum of movements from the strengthening of Chabad to the innovations of Havurot and Jewish Renewal. Another trend that was more political—and there was not always a separation between the political and the religious, with varying degrees of combination—found a Jewish way to join the ethnic pride movement by focusing on the Holocaust, Israel, and Soviet Jewry. Some people took these elements and became right-wing hardliners, such as Meir Kahane and the Jewish Defense League. Others of us turned more to the left, framing Zionism as a Jewish national liberation movement, and placing it in the context of other national liberation movements of oppressed people around the world in the postcolonial era. A pithy summary of our attitude was the slogan in a poster from the period: “Be a Revolutionary in Zion, and a

Zionist in the Revolution.”⁷ What we understood this to mean was that there was a way to be both a Jew and a progressive social / political activist, and that was to work toward “the revolution” by doing it among our own people in our own land—that is, in Israel one could genuinely participate *as a Jew* in political issues of Jewish and worldwide importance.

I came to these views in the late 1960s through early 1970s when I was a member of *Hashomer Hatzair*, a small socialist-Zionist youth group (affiliated with one of Israel’s kibbutz federations, the *Kibbutz Artzi*) that was adamantly secular, advocated a two-state solution of the Israel-Arab conflict, and encouraged aliyah to a kibbutz in Israel as a form of personal and political transformation. But our own ethnic awakening meant that my cohort was also acutely aware of the increased prominence of the Palestine Liberation Organization after the Six-Day War, and accepted the existence of a Palestinian Arab national movement that we would have to confront and make peace with. This meant that we were critical of many of Israel’s policies, particularly of land appropriation and settlements in the Occupied Territories, because we felt this would diminish the possibility of arriving at a peace settlement. Some of this cohort, including myself, immigrated to Israel, living here for greater or lesser periods of time and continuing their social and political activism in various forms. In Israel, we find the interesting phenomenon of American immigrants disproportionately represented on both the far left and the far right of the political spectrum. The commonality between these views is the fundamentally Zionist decision to create a meaningful life by living and acting as Jews within a Jewish polity.

Arendt shared the view that the future of the Jewish people and of Israel were linked, but therefore concluded that it was important to all Jews, not just Israelis, to find a way to co-exist with Israel’s Arab neighbors. In particular, Arendt saw a key problem in the Arab-Israeli conflict as one of competing arguments—what are today called “narratives”—that “make sense only in the closed framework of one’s own people and history,”⁸ and, she wrote, achieving peace would “depend upon a changed attitude toward each other.”⁹ While some of the details of those political struggles had long been settled—particularly the question of Israel’s founding and survival—in my view, many of Arendt’s positions were not only prescient, but are still pertinent. The revival of interest in her Jewish writing (not just this new collection) indicates that others now share this view.

Beyond the specifics of her analyses of the Israeli-Arab conflict, Zionism, or antisemitism, I learned an important perspective from Arendt: being Jewish was an instance of human being, and it was thus important to examine the *interactions* between Jews and non-Jews. Arendt’s analyses exemplify a

methodology in which the particular and the general are intrinsically interwoven, where issues of universal import are revealed only through the consideration of Jewish particularity. This methodology resulted in writings of more than parochial Jewish interest, by way of claiming a universal import to the Jewish experience. She refused to wall off Jewish statelessness and genocide in the Holocaust as a unique event, but insisted that the Nazi genocide “was a crime against humanity, perpetrated upon the body of the Jewish people, and . . . only the choice of victims, not the nature of the crime, could be derived from the long history of Jew-hatred and antisemitism.”¹⁰ In her view, the Jews were victims of the Nazis, but they were only the first victims. This is quite in contrast to common forms of modern Jewish history, which tend to be of interest primarily to Jews because Jews are treated either as a “religion” (coreligionists who have no national ties to Jews in other nation-states) or as a “nation” (whose members have been physically dispersed across the globe).

Arendt rejected the politics of victimization that have become so popular today, in which a group seeks to portray itself as wronged and thereby, somehow, absolved of responsibility for the world as a whole and their place in it. She makes this clear at the beginning of “Antisemitism,” which opens *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where she demolishes the “scapegoat” and “eternal” theories of antisemitism as ahistorical, pointing out that not only do they contradict each other—the first asserting that picking on the Jews was accidental, the second declaring this was inevitable—but also both “deny all specific Jewish responsibility and refuse to discuss matters in specific historical terms.”¹¹ She contends that “however much the Jewish pariah might be, from the historical viewpoint, the product of an unjust dispensation . . . politically speaking, every pariah who refused to be a rebel was partly responsible for his own position.”¹² Arendt particularly lauds the Jewish fighting forces that resisted the Nazis, who shifted from accepting themselves as victims to struggling “to salvage ‘the honor and glory of the Jewish people.’ And in doing so they ended the pariah existence of the Jewish people in Europe.”¹³

This praise is of particular relevance, since today we see how supporters of both Israel and the Palestinians compete to portray their side as the greater victim. Arendt’s critiques of Jewish emancipation, of Zionism, and of Jewish leadership rest on the premise that all people, even those who are oppressed, persecuted, and victimized nevertheless bear some responsibility for the world we all co-create.

Most significant to me was Arendt’s approach and attitude: from the 1930s through the 1960s, she was passionately committed to Jewish politics and to the idea that there *was* a Jewish people, which included all Jews regardless of where they lived or how religious they were. She therefore assumes the existence of

a transnational Jewish polity—sufficiently strong, proud, and secure—that all Jews have an inherent right to engage in the politics of the Jewish community, and through it, in world politics. While she was often critical of Jewish leaders, I think she was a “loyal critic,” in the sense that she always included herself in the community affected by the answer to the fundamental political question: *What is good for the Jews?* For example, she supported Zionist efforts to create a Jewish homeland in Palestine, but was against statehood (like Martin Buber and Judah Magnes). Despite her opposition to statehood, she was not anti-Zionist in the fashion of some assimilationist or religious Jews, or of non-Jews, such as Arabs, who rejected the Jews’ right to build a national home in Palestine. She seems much more of a Zionist than not, and her criticism follows the lines of the cultural Zionist critique of the state-oriented Zionists. When Arendt is critical, it is because she sees certain policies and actions as *bad for the Jews*. While I have never agreed with all of Arendt’s analyses, I find this attitude to be a continuing model of Jewish political speech and advocacy.

Having rediscovered Arendt’s forgotten Jewish essays during the research for my undergraduate senior thesis, I thought it would be a good idea to bring out a collection. I modeled this on *Illuminations*, Arendt’s collection of her friend Walter Benjamin’s essays, which brought him to the attention of the English-speaking world. Arendt’s publisher, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (HBJ), turned down my proposal. Grove Press accepted my proposal, and as we moved toward completion of the project, HBJ protested, saying that they held the rights because they were Arendt’s publisher. Grove convinced them to let the book be published because HBJ had been offered the project and rejected it. From a business point of view, perhaps HBJ was correct, because after three years the book was remaindered and soon went out of print, despite generally positive reviews. There was no hint of what was to become the Arendt revival in the 1990s.

In preparing *The Jew as Pariah*, I corresponded with Gershom Scholem and received his permission to include his critical letter to Arendt about *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (the letter is not in *The Jewish Writings*), because I wanted to include both sides of their famous exchange. While Scholem agreed to have his letter published, he deplored the book’s title and was especially disturbed because the editor (me) was a Jew. This surprised me, mainly because it meant that he didn’t realize I had borrowed the title from Arendt’s own essay, “The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition.” I can only infer that Scholem had never read that essay and didn’t understand the positive spin Arendt gave the term *pariah*.

With the renewal of interest in Arendt in the 1990s, many colleagues asked me about having *The Jew as Pariah* reprinted; it had become a scarce collector’s item, selling used for over \$100. After various inquiries, I got in touch

with Jerome Kohn, Arendt’s former student, who had become her literary executor. He was planning an expanded collection, about double the length of the volume I had edited, adding many pieces I hadn’t known about. We collaborated on this volume, *The Jewish Writings*, which has been translated into various languages, and now Hebrew.

I made aliyah the month *The Jew as Pariah* was published, in 1978, and was working in the dining room of Kibbutz Gezer when I received the first reviews. Since I was living in Israel, I naturally had a desire to see a Hebrew version published; it seemed obvious that Arendt’s words continued to speak to the contemporary political situation. When I was living at Kibbutz Harel, which was associated with Kibbutz Artzi, I got in touch with an editor from *Sifriat Poalim*, their publishing house. I sent him a copy of the book; it seemed natural to me that this (supposedly) progressive publisher would find Arendt of value. I guess I was young and naïve! In a memorable and unpleasant telephone conversation I was told that they wouldn’t have anything to do with Arendt, who was a *sonah Israel* – an “Israel hater.” This view seemed baseless and ignorant, but it showed me that in Israel, Arendt remained a pariah, in death as in life. Therefore, seeing the Hebrew version of *The Jewish Writings* fulfills a goal of mine that is over 30 years old, and I find it particularly ironic that Arendt is being published by *HaKibbutz HaMeuchad*, after she was rejected 30 years ago by *Sifrat Poalim*.

What has changed? No doubt the openness of Israelis to Arendt is made possible by the distance of time and the self-critical perspectives of the “new history” and “post-Zionism” that have developed since the mid-1990s.¹⁴ Certainly Arendt’s views concerning the negative consequences to Jewish Israeli society resulting from the perpetual conflict with the Palestinians seem sadly prescient. These include its military orientation, the debasement of the concept of “the chosen people” into a justification for discrimination against non-Jews, and challenges resulting from the lack of separation between religion and state. Arendt’s ideas about Jewish peoplehood, Jewish interdependence with non-Jews, and rejecting the politics of victimhood provide models for how to engage in Jewish politics that are different from the Israeli civil religion of Holocaust and Masada that portrays the Jews as eternal victims of unending hatred.

Exactly what Arendt would say about contemporary debates, such as the one between a two-state solution or binationalism, is speculative and irrelevant; she would not want her writings to be treated like proof-texts by loyal “Arendtians.” What matters is what we can learn about nonconformist ways of thinking and the position of a “loyal critic.” Just as I learned a great deal from Arendt, I hope that making these writings available in Hebrew will add an element of passionate thoughtfulness to political discourse in Israel, where passion is plentiful, but thoughtfulness and tolerance seem increasingly scarce.

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1. In this context I want to note that Prof. Aschheim was my first teacher of Jewish history when I was a student at the Institute for Jewish Youth Leaders from Abroad in 1972. This was before I went to college and before he earned his Ph.D. under George Mosse. From Prof. Aschheim and his colleague, Zeev Mankowitz, I first heard of Hannah Arendt in their lectures on Jewish history, the Holocaust, and Zionism.
 2. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: The Viking Press, 1964), 125.
 3. Scholem Gershom, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 304.
 4. Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 497.
 5. My formulation of this framework was significantly influenced by Jacob Neuser's book, *Stranger at Home* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
 6. Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 328.
 7. Radical Zionist Alliance poster from 1971; http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/whi/fullRecord.asp?id=53687&qstring=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.wisconsinhistory.org%2Fwhi%2Fresults.asp%3Fsubject_narrow%3DCivil%2Bdefense
 8. Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 430.
 9. Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 427.
 10. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 268–269
 11. Hannah Arendt, "Antisemitism": Part One of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 8.
 12. Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 285.
 13. Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 199.
 14. See, for example, Moshe Zimmermann's article "Hannah Arendt, the Early 'Post-Zionist'" in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 181–193.