

***The Breakdown of Discourse – Post-Holocaust Jewish
identity and the Scholem-Arendt exchange***

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the significance of the public exchange of letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt in the wake of the Eichmann trial. Using rhetorical analysis it considers the respective arguments concerning Jewish responsibility, the incompatible political-moral frameworks offered to underpin such judgments, and the extreme identities the correspondents construct for each other. In doing so, it identifies the ultimate significance of the exchange with the total breakdown of discourse it symbolically resulted in – in other words, with the consensus pertaining to the Holocaust leading to a complete incommensurability of the respective political-moral positions. Such a state of affairs is finally accounted for in terms of the far-reaching consensus between Arendt and Scholem, reaching beyond politics and even identity: the total inescapability of Jewishness.

Keywords: Jewish identity, Holocaust, Judaism, secularism, Hannah Arendt, Gershom Scholem, rhetorical analysis

1. Introduction

Why would people stop talking? What is it that would make them give up the possibility to pursue arguments, to flesh out disagreements and, ultimately, to convince each other on the merits of their respective positions? These are the questions that this paper seeks to answer in relation to the public correspondence between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt in 1963, in the wake of the latter's publication of the highly controversial book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.¹

This exchange of letters has always been considered a significant point in the Jewish intellectual history of the 20th century. Representing an oasis of intellectuals within the chaos that the reception of Arendt's book resembled at times,² the two German-Jewish luminaries are seen to have been able to discuss what most of Arendt's critics overlooked in their outrage. Since the very beginning, the correspondence has ritually been referred to by such terms as the "famous exchange of letters,"³ the "famous letter,"⁴ the "fabled

¹ The exchange was first published in *Mitteilungsblatt*, No.33, 16 August 1963, and reprinted in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 20 October 1963, as well as in *Encounter* (January 1964). The page-numbers in this paper refer to the reprint of the *Encounter* version in Arendt's posthumous book, see Hannah Arendt, "'Eichmann in Jerusalem': An Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt," in *The Jew as Pariah*, ed. Ron Feldman (New York: The Grove Press, 1978). Henceforth referred to as SAE.

² For a descriptions of the controversy, see Richard I. Cohen, "Breaking the Code: Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and the Public Polemic: Myth, Memory and Historical Imagination," in: *Michael: On the History of the Jews in the Diaspora*, Vol. XIII. eds. Dina Porat and Shlomo Simonsohn (Vol 13, Tel-Aviv: The Diaspora Research Institute, 1993), 26-60; Anson Rabinbach, "Eichmann in New York: The New York intellectuals and the Hannah Arendt controversy," *October* 108 (2004), 97-111.

³ Leora Bilsky, *Transformative Justice: Israeli Identity on Trial* (New York: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), 146.

⁴ Michael Marrus, "Eichmann in Jerusalem: Justice and History," in: *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, ed. Steven E. Aschheim (London: University of California Press, 2001), 205-213, esp. 205.

exchange”⁵ or the “well-known tempestuous clash”⁶ which became “deeply imprinted in the public mind.”⁷ Scholem’s letter was intimated to comprise “the authoritative words”⁸ since he was accepted as being able to speak as the representative of the offended community.⁹ Arendt, on her part, was similarly taken to have given a principled response and to have defended a position that many people held dear.¹⁰ Apparently, the two luminaries of common German-Jewish origin, the historian of religion in Jerusalem and the political theorist in New York, had a deep and important message to impart about the understanding of the Holocaust and the identity of the Jewish people in a post-assimilatory age.

As to the content of this message, it is predominantly with reference to various historical, sociological-political, philosophical or biographical contexts that the “famous and oft-quoted”¹¹ exchange has been discussed throughout the decades. Most often, perhaps, it was the oeuvre of Arendt¹² or the controversy around her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*;¹³ at

⁵ Richard Wolin, “The Ambivalences of German-Jewish Identity: Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem,” *History and Memory* 8(2) (1996), 9-35, esp. 10.

⁶ Amos Elon, “Wise Survivors,” *New York Review of Books* 50(56) (2003), 76-79, esp. 76.

⁷ Raluca Eddon, “Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt and the Paradox of ‘Non-Nationalist’ Nationalism,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 12(1) (2003), 55-68, esp. 55.

⁸ Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg Limited, 1983), 273.

⁹ For such ideas expressed, see Seyla Benhabib, “Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 65-86, esp. 65; Margaret Canovan, “Politics as Culture: Hannah Arendt and the Public Realm,” in: *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, eds. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman (New York: State of New York UP, 1994), 179-205, esp. 193.

¹⁰ Idith Zertal, “Between *Love of the World* and *Love of Israel*,” in *Israel’s Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* (London: Cambridge UP, 2005), 128-163.

¹¹ Walter Laqueur, “The Arendt Cult: Hannah Arendt as Political Commentator,” in: *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, ed. Steven E. Aschheim (London: California UP, 2001), 47-64, esp. 59.

¹² Cf. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For the Love of the World* (London: Yale UP, 2004), 337; Dagmar Barnouw, *Visible Places: Hannah Arendt and the German-Jewish Experience* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1990), 233, 237. For articles focusing on both Arendt’s and Scholem’s work in

other times, the sociological phenomenon of Jewish assimilation;¹⁴ and occasionally, the grand philosophical debate of universalism/individualism versus traditionalism/"communitarianism" in a post-Holocaust age,¹⁵ sometimes in the explicit context of the State of Israel.¹⁶ Thus, the contexts within which the exchange was invoked varied considerably. However, there has been virtually unanimous consensus that the message of the exchange may be found in illuminating those broader contexts invoked.

Although they have cemented the reputation of the otherwise considerably slim exchange, none of the previous commentaries have ever confronted its most surprising and indeed poignant characteristic:¹⁷ namely, that the correspondence between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt did not merely expose different judgments, agendas or even moral commitments, but resulted in two erstwhile friends never talking to each other again. It led to a final and total breakdown of discourse.¹⁸

contextualizing the exchange, see David Suchoff, "Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt and the Scandal of Jewish Particularity," *The Germanic Review* 72(1) (1997), 57-76; Eddon, "Gershom Scholem."

¹³ Cf. Cohen, "Breaking the code."

¹⁴ Laqueur, "The Arendt Cult"; Wolin, "Ambivalences."

¹⁵ Cf. Steven E. Aschheim, *Scholem, Arendt, Klemperer: Intimate Chronicles in Turbulent Times* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2001), 60.

¹⁶ Cf. Zertal, "Between *Love of the World*."

¹⁷ Interestingly enough, for all the fame and ritualistic invocations of the exchange, to date there is only a single chapter (by the Israeli historian, Idith Zertal) which is solely devoted to its analysis. See Zertal, "Between *Love of the World*." The present paper is the summation of a series of earlier attempts by the author to correct this state of affairs. See David Kaposi, "The unbearable lightness of identity: membership, tradition and the Jewish anti-Semite in Gershom Scholem's letter to Hannah Arendt," *Critical Discourse Studies* 6(4) (2009), 269–281; "To Judge or Not to Judge: The clash of perspectives in the Scholem-Arendt Exchange," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 14(1) (2008), 95-119.

¹⁸ With the full correspondence between Arendt and Scholem now available, the carefully "staged" manner of this particular exchange may be appreciated. Detailed analysis of it in the context of these *private* letters, however, would not only stretch the limits of this paper beyond what is possible, but transgress the distinction between the personal and the public that both participants

While such a state of affairs may simply be attributed to common human frailties (say, grandstanding, arrogance or a progressively deteriorating friendship reaching the tipping point),¹⁹ this paper will argue that it is here that the ultimate political and moral significance of the exchange may be found. In terms of its breakdown, it may be understood to have exposed a collapse in very public discourses contesting the nature, political consequences and moral obligations of a post-Holocaust Jewish identity. Therefore, the task of this paper will be to meet this breakdown head on, and to provide an account of/for it in terms of the ideas, arguments and identities implicitly conveyed in the famous letters.

In doing this, it will adopt a radically different course of analysis from the wealth of existing commentary. Instead of primarily approaching the exchange from any kind of context, it will exclusively focus on the arguments of the participants, and unpack the explicit as well as implicit political-moral contents and identities that are occasioned by

found highly important. Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem, *Der Briefwechsel: 1939-1964*, ed. Marie-Louise Knott (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag/Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010). For an analysis of the correspondence with a particular focus on its ending, see Steven E. Aschheim, "Between New York and Jerusalem," *Jewish Review of Books* 2(1) (2011), 5-8.

¹⁹ The relationship between Scholem and Arendt predated their correspondence on the Eichmann trial by more than thirty years. By Scholem's account, they first met in 1932 in Berlin, through their common friend Walter Benjamin. Immediate correspondence ensued and during the war they formed a relatively close relationship. It was never an easy friendship, however, and the differing worldviews of the two protagonists regularly surfaced, as can be assessed from their earlier letters (see especially a fierce private debate on Arendt's essay *Zionism Reconsidered* in 1944, as well as certain comments Arendt made about Scholem elsewhere. Nevertheless, the abrupt end that was to follow might still be regarded as wholly unexpected. See Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The story of a friendship* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 241; Hannah Arendt, "Zionism Reconsidered," in: *The Jew as Pariah*, ed. Ron Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978), 131-163. For less than flattering comments by Arendt on Scholem, see Hannah Arendt and Kurt Blumenfeld, "... in keinem Besitz verwurzelt," *Die Korrespondenz* (Hamburg: Rotbuch Verlag, 1995), 135, 138, 176. For the full correspondence, see Arendt and Gershom Scholem, *Der Briefwechsel*.

them.²⁰ While it may seem fictitious to maintain that such rhetorical analysis could exist in a virtually ahistorical vacuum, it is hoped that a sustained close reading of the text itself may be useful in addressing the issue of how the arguments of the participants and the assumptions behind them could lead to the breakdown of their discourse, both in a personal and in a political-moral sense.

Thus, this rhetorical analysis of the debate will aim at two immanent aspects of the exchange. First, it will provide a detailed “synoptic” account of Scholem’s and Arendt’s interpretation of Jewish moral responsibility during the Holocaust and the corresponding possibility of present day judgment, and thereby recover the wider political-moral frameworks that are occasioned to underpin their respective arguments. Of course, it has been claimed many times that Scholem proposes his arguments in terms of the Jewish tradition and Arendt hers in those of crucial aspects of the Enlightenment.²¹ Yet, as this paper will argue, the real thrust of the exchange is not the simple invocation of these political-moral frameworks. It is rather that they should implicitly tend towards such extreme positions, where no reconciliation of them appears possible, and where the correspondents present each other only in terms of enemies: the Jewish antisemite and the religious Zionist ideologue. Instead of the explicit (and unsurprising) use of different political-moral frameworks, it is their implicit shift to extremes that will be identified as the immediate reason for the breakdown of discourse.

²⁰ For examples of the rhetorical perspective in philosophy and psychology, see Michael Billig, *Arguing and Thinking: A rhetorical approach to social psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the discursive limits of “sex”* (London: Routledge, 1993). David Kaposi, “Truth and Rhetoric: The Promise of John Dean’s Memory to the Discipline of Psychology,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 42(1) (2012), 1-19; “The crooked timber of identity: integrating discursive, critical, and psychosocial analysis,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 52(2) (2013), 310-28.

²¹ Cf. Aschheim, *Scholem, Arendt, Klemperer*; Zertal, “Between Love of the World.”

Secondly, the paper will not only concern itself with identifying this breakdown. Rather, it will argue that at the very root of this breakdown a firm consensus between Arendt and Scholem may be found: the mutual commitment to the categorical inescapability of Jewishness. Ultimately, it is this consensus – that Jewishness cannot be forsaken, cannot be hidden, cannot be forgotten – that will tentatively be suggested as a reason why the conversation had so completely broken down. The message that we may uncover from the exchange between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt will therefore be the potentially dangerous consequences of such a commitment.

2. The clash of interpretations: Judging (the) Jews

It may be the case that the process of “canonization” automatically makes a text lose its radical characteristics. Likewise, it may be that a debate perceived as a “family quarrel”²² cannot be but the exchange of banal (if grandstanding) positions. Yet if we have a fresh look at Scholem’s exposition of his problem with Arendt’s book, it is a truly extraordinary statement we encounter:

“[...] your thesis that these machinations of the Nazis served in some way to blur the distinction between torturer and victim – a thesis which you employ to belabor the prosecution in the Eichmann trial – seems to me wholly false and tendentious. In the camps, human beings were systematically degraded; they were, as you say, compelled to participate in their own extermination, and to assist in the execution of fellow-prisoners. Is the distinction between torturer and victim thereby blurred? What perversity! We are asked, it

²² Suchoff, “Gershom Scholem,” 57.

appears, to confess that the Jews, too, had their 'share' in the acts of genocide." (SAE, 243)

It is a very serious charge that we read here. Indeed, to implicate "*the Jews*", on par with their "torturer" in their own destruction is nothing short of antisemitism. What is attributed here to Arendt's book is one the most extreme charges possible as regards the Jewish people and the Holocaust.²³

Yet this very extreme state of affairs automatically leads the reader to further questions. For a start, as startling as the attributed statement sounds, is it conceivable that Arendt would have really uttered it? Is it believable that she would have implicated *the entire* Jewish people in the "acts of genocide"? Defending her position, Arendt explained: "The question I raised was that of the cooperation of the Jewish functionaries during the 'Final solution' [...]"(SAE, 248). According to her, then, a simple question was raised regarding a numerically small sub-group of the Jewish people. As for the camps, the symbol of the condition of the Jewish people that Scholem cites, Arendt herself is ready to treat it as the "state of exception,"²⁴ where it is pure necessity that rules, and where the capacity of moral judgment must therefore be suspended:

"That the distinction between victims and persecutors was blurred in the camps, deliberately and with calculation, is well known, and I as well as others have insisted on this aspect of totalitarian methods. But to repeat: this is not what I mean by a Jewish share in the guilt, or by the totality of the collapse of

²³ For somewhat similar charges from contemporary literature, see Bernard Wasserstein, "Blame the victim: Hannah Arendt among the Nazis: the historian and her sources," *Times Literary Supplement* 9 October (2009), 13-15; Richard Wolin, "The banality of evil: The demise of a legend," *Jewish Review of Books* 5(2) (2014), 47-55.

²⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (London, 2005), 29.

all standards. This was part of the system and had indeed nothing to do with Jews.” (SAE, 249)

So shall we take Scholem’s accusation as a simple case of misreading? Worse, is it perhaps a slanderous statement rather than a lapse of rationality? Scholem continues:

“In your treatment of the problem of how the Jews reacted to these extreme circumstances – to which neither of us was exposed – I detect, often enough, in place of balanced judgment, a kind of demagogic will-to-overstatement. Which of us can say today what decisions the elders of the Jews – or whatever we choose to call them – ought to have arrived at in the circumstances? [...] There were the *Judenräte*, for example; some among them were swine, others were saints. I have read a great deal about both varieties. There were among them also many people in no way different from ourselves, who were compelled to make terrible decisions in circumstances that we cannot even begin to reproduce or reconstruct. I do not know whether they were right or wrong. Nor do I presume to judge. I was not there.” (SAE, 242-243)

At the conclusion of this passage Scholem reiterates the categorical denial of the possibility of judgment. The basis of the “state of exception” is, presumably, to be found in the compelling state of absolute necessity, metaphorically invoked in the ultimate argument of having not been “there.” *Where*, however, had Scholem not been present, we may ask? Who, exactly, must not be judged? On the face of it, two apparently non-identical social categories are simultaneously occasioned by him: “the Jews” and the “elders of the Jews.” Would this not bolster Arendt’s version of events and contradict Scholem’s essential homogeneity of “the Jews”?

Certainly not. The dividing line between the two collapses as the potential differences of category become systematically erased. First, institutional or power divisions within the Jewish community are overwritten, as not only does Scholem choose the institutionally neutral term “elders,” but also makes it clear that it does not make any difference what we call them. This is, presumably, due to the extremely “compelling” nature of the “extreme circumstances.” Second, it is the “extreme circumstance” of the gas chambers that exclusively *defines* this situation and creates a uniform whole of *the* Jewish people by “compelling” all of them to become passive victims. As it is death and passivity that exclusively define the group, no distinction can be made between the part (elders) and the whole (the Jews). And because “extreme circumstances” are the foundations of this category, judgment must categorically be suspended with regard to every single one of its members. Judging (that is, attributing moral responsibility to) any number of “the Jews” would be equal to judging all of them. As such, the very act of judgment, the very assumption that judgment as such is possible becomes an act of antisemitism. In Scholem’s reconstruction, there is no place for a middle ground.²⁵

It is against this background that Arendt has to defend that she had sought to “raise a question” of the moral responsibility of a Jewish institution, the “functionaries.” How can the basis from which she ventures into moral probing be more convincing than Scholem’s categorical suspension of it?

“[...] we should not forget that we are dealing here with conditions which were terrible and desperate enough, but which were not the conditions of concentration camps. These decisions were made in an atmosphere of terror but not under the immediate pressure and impact of terror. These are

²⁵ It is important to note in this respect that the exceptions occasioned by Scholem appear in non-human forms: “swines” and “saints.”

important differences in degree, which every student of totalitarianism must know and take into account. These people had still a certain, limited freedom of decision and of action.” (SAE, 248-249)

In these words, the scientific mindset of the historian/sociologist asserts itself. Scholem’s homogenous category of “the Jews” is exposed to be based on flimsy socio-historical assumptions and is therefore divided into the population of the camps and those of the ghettos. Thus, explicit differentiation is made between groups that experience varying degrees of terror and, correspondingly, have thus various degrees of freedom at their disposal. And in creating this distinction the essential condition of moral judgment – freedom of choice in the situation of “functionaries”/“elders” – is discovered.

Yet, if this is the condition from which to “raise a question,” the actual content of the judgment still remains to be seen. What exactly is the problem with “Jewish functionaries,” especially that Arendt explicitly clarifies that the issue of “traitors” (SAE, 248) does not concern her?

“I have made my own position plain, and yet it is obvious that you did not understand it. I said that there was no possibility of resistance, but there existed the possibility of *doing nothing*. And in order to do nothing, one did not need to be a saint, one needed only to say: ‘I am just a simple Jew, and I have no desire to play any other role.’” (SAE, 248)

According to this account, what can reasonably be expected in retrospect is not *doing something* but, rather, *doing nothing*. While this may sound a simple request, it implies that the functionaries should have in effect renounced their position and disbanded their institution. This is a rather curious demand and brings up two related questions: what

justifies this absolute imperative? and why could, or indeed should, certain activities of the “functionaries” not have been carried on? Surely, certain aspects of their work were beneficial enough: alleviating pain or making life more bearable in other ways. Why could they not have carried on with those activities? What, in short, was the problem with the institution of the Jewish Councils *as such*? Here, the only analogy which may suggest a justification is as shocking as it is unexpected:

“These people had still a certain, limited freedom of decision and of action. Just as the SS murderers also possessed, as we now know, a limited choice of alternatives. They could say: ‘I wish to be relieved of my murderous duties,’ and nothing happened to them.” (SAE, 249)

In Arendt’s framework, being a functionary directly translates into immoral conduct, as being a functionary essentially equals being a “murderer.” The institution of the Jewish councils became the instrument of death. What is more, if we explore this analogy further, it appears that the “functionaries” also had near-absolute freedom to choose “not to play any other role” than being a “simple Jew”; and thereby to cease being instrumental in killing their own people. While, for Arendt, nothing is expected of people in the camps and no active resistance is deemed possible in the ghettos, it becomes nothing less than a matter of virtually absolute free choice as well as a categorical imperative for Jewish “functionaries” to cease to act altogether, and thereby renounce their murderous role.

This is once again an extreme charge and turn of events. For, according to Arendt’s version, it is not only that the “functionaries” become (inadvertent but *de facto*) *genocidaires* in rejecting the freely available option of becoming “simple Jews”. Not only is it the case that those “simple Jews” were killed due to the co-operation of the “functionaries”. But it is exactly because of the stature of those hapless yet *solidaire* and morally righteous

“simple Jews” that these functionaries are now immunized against moral scrutiny in Scholem’s logic. The memory of the dead is mobilized to save the face of those that, unintentionally though, co-operated with the Nazis carrying out the genocide. Thus, Arendt clearly does not simply answer Scholem’s accusation but he reveals what is a very dubious moral argument underlying his logic.

Yet, to take a step back from the text, it is equally clear that Scholem’s criteria for judgment (“being there”) did not flow from some flawed scholarly standard (after all, Scholem made a living of analyzing debates in the Middle Ages where he had not been present either) but from an altogether different, existential-moral authority. And similarly, the basis of this authority, the homogenous unity constructed in the category of “the Jews” may not have sprung from faulty socio-historical notions about the camps and the ghettos. Rather, it may have been rooted in the identity and existential status of *the* Jewish people who, after all, were *all* proclaimed to be dead by the Nazis. In this existential sense, then, any difference within the category may indeed be accidental and immaterial to the ultimate moral judgment. Any part of the category may stand for the whole.

Thus, in reality, it is not the details but the overall framework for making sense of those details that is contested by the correspondents. While in Arendt’s socio-historical logic the category of the Jews is constituted (and thereby fragmented) by situational factors, in Scholem’s existential-moral one its unity is the very foundation of the situation. And while the former may inevitably tend towards factors that build up action, responsibility and judgment, the latter may provide a better intuition of the overall moral picture. In the first, Jews face and make daily decisions, and become distinguishable on that everyday basis; in the second, they all are the same as the Nazis intended to put all of them into the same boat.

This may be all very well. Yet the main contention of this paper is that there is far more to this exchange than the appropriation of two different frameworks for moral inquiry.

Intriguingly, they do not so much appear to differ from each other as provide *mutually exclusive alternatives*. For one thing, what Scholem's construction of the homogeneity and categorical unity of "the Jews" conveyed is not simply the presence of an alternative existential-moral consideration. Rather, the ultimate standard for judgment, "being there," in effect categorically outlawed any socio-historical ground upon which evaluation may have been carried out. For another, Arendt's distinctions did not simply problematize the hegemony of the existential-moral authority through introducing the criteria of sociology/history, but were themselves similarly absolute. In her framework, an unbridgeable dividing line separated "simple Jews" from "functionaries"; and no overriding difference was indicated between the "functionaries" and the "SS murderers" (at least as far as this particular moral judgment was concerned). Scholem's extreme, categorical prohibition of judgment is thereby replaced with Arendt's equally extreme and categorical judgment on a Jewish institution. And while the former is made possible by the identity of the Jews *as Jews* becoming the all-encompassing factor of consideration, the latter's *sine qua non* is the complete neglect of that very factor.

This means that two tasks remain for us. First, the political-moral frameworks from which the alternative judgments and the alternative grounds for judgments emerged must be analyzed in detail. Second, attention must equally be paid to the *relationship* between these frameworks and the ways in which they can or cannot accommodate each other.

3. The clash of accounts I: Scholem and the politics of "Ahabath Israel"

It is not only analytic curiosity that prompts us to dig deeper in the exchange. In his letter, Scholem himself alludes to the "root of our disagreement," prefacing what is arguably one of the most quoted paragraphs in 20th-century Jewish intellectual history:

“In the Jewish tradition there is a concept, hard to define and yet concrete enough, which we know as *Ahabath 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 it. A discussion such as is attempted in your book would seem to me to require – you will forgive my mode of expression – the most old-fashioned, the most circumspect, the most exacting treatment possible – precisely because of the feelings aroused by this matter, this matter of the destruction of one-third of our people – and I regard you wholly as a daughter of our people, and in no other way.” (SAE, 241-242)

The central part of this utterance has always been taken to express some deep and sombre request, alongside the verdict that Arendt falls largely or even totally short of it. This, then, appears to be the explanation of her book’s erroneous historical and moral judgment.

But what precisely is this “*Ahabath Israel*,” of which there is little trace in Arendt? Let us first of all observe that, intriguingly, Scholem does not categorize it as an emotion, as some subjective feeling in opposition to the qualities of objectivity or rationality. It is a “concept” that “we know.” A curious kind of “concept,” on the other hand, as it is “hard to define yet concrete enough.” What would such a “concept” be? How come we cannot define this concept? It is not an “emotion,” nor is it of theoretical nature either. The only candidate for interpretation may be that the concept of “*Ahabath Israel*” does not refer to something in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Rather it metaphorically refers to the way “we” should read the *Encyclopedia Judaica*. It is a way of doing things, a way of life that is

requested by Scholem, and it is this way of life whose “little trace” is accountable for the radical failure of Arendt’s political and moral judgment.²⁶

As for the *praxis* it advocates, we encounter some equally intricate features. Just as it was between cognition and emotion, this in-between-ness appears to be *Ahabath Israel’s* central characteristic in other respects as well. On the one hand, the use of the Hebrew idiom may indicate a unique foreign and arguably incommensurable authority. This authority is removed from the present German/English context, and cannot perhaps ever be assimilated to it, yet it exerts exclusive power over it.

On the other hand, this very standing apart is systematically broken down by Scholem’s overall formulation.

First, “Jewish tradition” or “jüdische Sprache”²⁷ is designated as *Ahabath Israel’s* origin, thereby erasing the possible gap which the use of the “Jewish religion” may have created in terms of a secular and modern context. Second, not only is the phrase unproblematically paraphrased, but this paraphrase – “the Jewish people” (in Hebrew: *am Yehudi*) – once again erases the difference that the possibly spiritual or religious connotations of the literal translation (“Israel”) would have indicated regarding the present context. And one cannot argue that Scholem refrains from employing the literal translation due to the fact this would denote the present modern State of Israel in a German/English context. For, third, the State of Israel has already been introduced: in the apparently “foreign” and “incommensurable” authority of *Ahabath Israel*. Again, Scholem could have used the widely received version for transcription (*Yisrael*) to mitigate any direct association to the modern state. As any reader in English or German may “recognize” the part “*Israel*” in

²⁶ Compare this with Scholem’s description of the pivotal issue that exercised his discussions with Walter Benjamin: “[Was] Judaism still alive as a heritage or an experience, even as something constantly evolving, or did it exist only as an object of cognition?” Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 165.

²⁷ Scholem, “Brief,” 208.

the apparently Hebrew idiom, it is of significance that he did not. Not only is therefore this curious political and moral authority somewhere between emotion and cognition. It also appears to be between past and present; religious tradition and secular modernity; the spiritual category of Israel and the ethnic category of the Jewish people – and between all of these and the modern State of Israel.

Thus, Scholem's utterance contests the very differentiation of all those categories. As he revealingly writes elsewhere: "[S]ecularism is part of the dialectic of the development *within* Judaism"²⁸ – in other words, his point of reference is certainly not the ideas of Enlightenment (where most of these dichotomies derive from) but that of Judaism. It is on this basis that the authority of "*Ahabath Israel*" and its *politics of continuity* stands, creating the unified political-moral category of "us." And if there is a real dividing line here, it is to be found somewhere beyond the pseudo-distinctions of past and present, religion and modernity, spirituality and ethnicity, Jewish people and (the State of) Israel.

Indeed, what Scholem's text accomplishes is not only the introduction of the relevant political-moral authority. Through erasing the separations between those alleged dichotomies (emotion and knowledge, past and present, etc.) and collapsing them all into what the authority of "*Ahabath Israel*" represents, the dividing line is moved to the point where it is only between "us" knowing "*Ahabath Israel*" and "you, dear Hannah," lacking in it. Arendt no longer stands as a possible representative of modernism, secularism, rationality or the like. She stands on her own. And therefore the issue at stake becomes no

²⁸ Gershom Scholem, "Zionism – Dialect of Continuity and Rebellion," in *Unease in Zion*, ed. Ehud Ben Ezer (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1974), 290. Similar ideas may also be found elsewhere in Scholem's oeuvre. See Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 33-34, 294-295; Gershom Scholem, *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 164. For a viewpoint categorically downplaying the significance of Scholem's general insights as opposed to his scholarly input, see Joseph Dan, *Gershom Scholem and the Mystical Dimension of Jewish History* (New York: New York UP, 1987), Chapter 1.

longer the book, nor the political-moral framework of proper interpretation, but rather the personal quality of the *author* herself. Stripped of all autonomous political content of possible relevance, it is simply the bare identity of Arendt which has to, in Scholem's construction, ultimately account for the existence of her morally suspect book. The political issue has therefore turned into an existential one. It turned into the implicit query: what has become of "dear Hannah"?

To find the letter's ultimate stance on Arendt's identity, it is somewhere else that we have to turn our attention. The paragraph following Scholem's outcry over the "blurring of distinction" (see above, [page xx](#)) reads as follows:

"I came across [...] a book by that honest Jewish anti-semite, Kurt Tucholsky. I cannot express myself, of course, with Kurt Tucholsky's eloquence, but I cannot deny that he was right: if all the Jews had run away – in particular, to Palestine – more Jews would have remained alive. Whether, in view of the special circumstances of Jewish history and Jewish life, that would have been possible, and whether it implies a historical share of guilt in Hitler's crime, is another question." (SAE, 244)

For a start, we have an explicit judgment here over an identity, the "honest antisemite," suggesting the relevance of some dishonest or unconfessed (or even unconscious) antisemite to the question of Arendt's book. Furthermore, we have the explicit assertion of this "honest" antisemite's argument being the Jews' "historical share of guilt in Hitler's crime." And this, to remember, was the exact verbatim charge Scholem levelled at *Arendt's* book some lines earlier (see above; [page xx](#)).

Thus, the ultimate account implied for the reconstructed antisemitic nature of the book may now be a direct line leading from an antisemitic source. Not just the absence of

the political-moral framework of "*Ahabath Israel*," but the alternative presence of the *antisemite*: not an accident but an intention. By this inference, Scholem places the issue at the ultimate moral stake: not at the level of judgment, not at the level of political-moral framework, but that of the identity and the personal moral deficiency of Hannah Arendt.

4. *The clash of accounts II: Arendt and the politics of "separation"*

It is no small challenge that Arendt faces; it is no small (if implicit) charge that has been levelled at her. As with the original charge, Arendt's answer is well known and often quoted:

"To come to the point: let me begin, going on from what I have just stated, with what you call 'love of the Jewish people' or *Ahabath Israel*. (Incidentally, I would be very grateful if you could tell me since when this concept has played a role in Judaism, when it was first used in Hebrew language and literature, etc.) You are quite right – I am not moved by any 'love' of this sort [...]: 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." (SAE, 246)

Evidently, Arendt disclaims this sort of "love" as she advocates the inherently discontinuous position of the critic, who studies, examines, scrutinizes concepts instead of automatically adopting them. Then, as to why this particular "concept" should be examined instead of adopted, it is made clear that she treats it as some sort of emotion vested in

collective, political entities. As was the case with the issue of judgment, instead of accepting and justifying her position with regard to Scholem's framework, Arendt subverts and delegitimizes it: it is, in her version, but the first step on the path towards chauvinism and collective egoism.

At the same time, we may at this point enquire why the simple use of emotions or even "love" in this discussion should warrant the ultimate spectre of Nazism. Can we find here any other reason than Arendt's well-documented conviction that the proper place of emotions is in the "human heart[']s] darkness" and that politics must never be reduced to "nature"?²⁹ By the same token, can we find the political-moral framework which this conviction is based on and which is explicitly drawn upon to counter Scholem's "*Ahabath Israel*"? The continuing (dis)engagement with Scholem's concept appears to provide such an answer:

"To clarify this, let me tell you of a conversation I had in Israel with a prominent political personality who was defending the – in my opinion disastrous – non-separation of religion and state in Israel. What he said – I am not sure of the exact words any more – ran something like this: 'You will understand that, as a Socialist, I, of course, do not believe in God; I believe in the Jewish people.' I found this a shocking statement and, being too shocked, I did not reply at the time. But I could have answered: 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 towards Him was greater than its fear. And now this people believes only in itself? What good can come out of that? – Well, in this sense I do not "love" the Jews, nor do I "believe" in them; I merely belong to them as a matter of course, beyond dispute or argument." (SAE, 247)

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 96, 108.

Here, Arendt uncovers the explicit framework underlying her stance. It is the bedrock of the Enlightenment and, arguably, *the* defining achievement of secularism: the separation of state and religion.³⁰ What is uncovered in “non-separation” is the process whereby concepts or sentiments that were originally directed to the Absolute Being (becoming thereby non-disputable values) are channelled to non-sacred, secular-relative and disputable objects: to the state and the people. As such, for those adhering to the politics of “*Ahabath Israel*” and “non-separation” in general, state and people will begin to be seen in some distinctively perfect and unearthly light. Beyond the irrationality of emotions, this light may dictate that these objects remain immune from criticism.

Yet if this is so, Arendt’s framework brings two radically new aspects to the exchange. For a start, she implicitly disclaims the dispute with, let alone the rejection of, *the* Jewish people, *the* Jewish tradition, Zionism or even “*Ahabath Israel*” itself. Rather, it is a particular practice and rhetoric abusing these concepts that she finds problematic in Gershom Scholem’s letter. Instead of the implied solemn claim that he would represent the entire Jewish community, Gershom Scholem is found to propagate a partisan agenda that can essentially be seen as *religious Zionist* ideology.

Moreover, just as the main feature of this partisan ideological stance is no longer the mere immersion in the “darkness” of love or in the Jewish tradition but the abuse of them, neither is its defining characteristic “simple” chauvinism. That is to say, the politics of “*Ahabath Israel*” is not simply unjust or prejudiced towards other nations but by claiming to invoke indisputable and absolute values it attempts to stop *internal* dialogue, criticism and

³⁰ Hannah Arendt, “Religion and Politics,” in: *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 368-390. It is noteworthy that the idea underlying secularism (i.e. the radical separation of the sphere of politics and that of any metaphysical system) was, for Arendt, more of normative than of actual historical dimension. On this, see Samuel Moyn, “Hannah Arendt on the secular,” *New German Critique* 105 (2008): 71-96.

dissent: “You know as well as I how often those who merely report certain unpleasant facts are accused of lack of soul, lack of heart, or what you call *Herzenstakt*. We both know, in other words, how often these emotions are used in order to conceal factual truth” (SAE, 247).³¹ The “politics” of “*Ahabath Israel*” may therefore embrace the entirety of the People/State of Israel, but this embrace will then stifle the sphere of *politics* within them. The very sphere, that is, where they could deliberate about competing versions of the good life, rights or wrongs, past responsibilities and future conduct. Thus, the proposal for the combination of the political-rhetorical abuse of emotions and religious concepts (both of non-disputable nature) on behalf of the entire group ultimately results in the destruction of that group as a political community.³²

Yet these two emerging aspects still do not exhaust the thrust of Arendt’s utterances. As Arendt shifted her focus from the danger of collective emotions to the realm of *politics* and the rhetorical abuse of indisputable values, she also shifted the focus from Scholem as a possible victim of his own emotional stance or religious fervour to Scholem as a political agent of moral responsibility. As such, her response implies the question: who are *you*, who have *you* become, dear Gerhard?

The sentences quoted immediately above construe an ambiguous state of affairs, where Scholem is both invoked as someone who “knows” of those who abuse originally sacred concepts in order to eliminate dissent, and as someone who at the same time employed all these suspicious rhetorical machinations (i.e. accusing Arendt of lack of heart

³¹ For analysis on the rhetoric of the charge of antisemitism in political debates, see Judith Butler, “The Charge of Anti-Semitism: Jews, Israel and The Risks of Public Critique,” in: *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004); Michael Finlay, “Pathologizing dissent: Identity politics, Zionism and the ‘self-hating Jew’,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 44(3) (2005), 201-222; Kaposi, “The unbearable lightness.”

³² Amongst other places, see Arendt’s elaboration on the relationship between the rhetoric of emotions and the anti-politics of totalitarianism see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Penguin Books, 1994).

and *Herzenstakt*³³). At a later point, however, it becomes clear what Arendt thinks her interlocutor's real position is:

“How you could believe that my book was ‘a mockery of Zionism’ would be a complete mystery to me, if I did not know that many people in Zionist circles have become incapable of listening to opinions or arguments which are off the beaten track and not consonant with their ideology. [...] I have great confidence in Lessing's *selbstdenken* for which, I think, no ideology, no public opinion and no ‘convictions’ can ever be a substitute.” (SAE, 249-250)

In this paragraph, we finally encounter the identity that Arendt attributes to Scholem. He is one of those “many people in Zionist circles” who is only capable of acknowledging what his ideological “beaten track” allows him. There can be no doubt that these people do not equal Zionism as such, only the already recognized destructive and anti-political streak within it. And there can be no real doubt either that Gershom Scholem is one of them. Therefore, what goes around in Scholem's version as the lack of “*Ahabath Israel*” and the charge of the “Jewish antisemite” comes around in Arendt's response as the practices of religious Zionist anti-politics and the charge of the ideologue who wishes to smash dissent, criticism and independent thinking.

There is time for reconstruction and there is time for reflection. Both of the participants' cases have been unpacked here, from the interpretation of the book, through the political-moral framework that such an interpretation should adopt, to the identity constructed to the interlocutor. As with the interpretations we encountered earlier, the

³³ Cf. “In circumstances such as these, would there not have been a place for what I can only describe with that modest German word – ‘*Herzenstakt*’?” (SAE, 242)

accounts and attributions that these letters provided for us in terms of the identity of their correspondent are surely beyond our expectations. Is Arendt a Jewish (quasi-)antisemite while Scholem simply the representative of *the* Jewish community and the spokesman of *the* Jewish tradition? Or is Scholem a (quasi-)totalitarian religious Zionist ideologist proceeding towards the destruction of *the* Jewish political community while Arendt but an “independent” thinker and dissenter? Who, in other words, is the real enemy of the Jews?

Heavy as these questions are, the ultimate dilemma of the exchange is not how we should answer them, but how they could have been implied by eminent intellectuals and (erstwhile) friends in the first place. How is it that they should arrive at such extreme versions as regards the judgment of Jewish moral responsibility during the Final Solution, with Scholem categorically dismissing any inquiry into this, and Arendt not simply affirming moral inquiry but categorically judging a Jewish institution collectively responsible for mass murder? How is it that they should arrive at extreme versions as regards each other’s identity, where Scholem attributes the position of the “Jewish antisemite” to Arendt, and Arendt the quasi-totalitarian ideologue of religious Zionism to Scholem? It is the case that the correspondents should reach the position where, theoretically as well as practically, *the possibility of discourse breaks down completely* that we ultimately need to examine.

Thus, it is this extreme and self-destructive nature of this exchange, deriving from the apparent taking of political-moral frameworks *ad absurdum*, that must be accounted for. This collapse of discourse will be analyzed by examining how the mutually exclusive identities are constructed from the respective political-moral frameworks.

5. The consensus of roots: The total inescapability of Jewishness

Thus, we now have to turn to the question of how and why these apparently extreme judgments could be derived from the frameworks of the participants, from “*Ahabath Israel*” and that of “separation between state and religion.” How is the connection constructed to the “Jewish antisemite” as well as to the “many people in Zionist circles” incapable of verging off from the “beaten track,” respectively?

Paradoxically enough, if we have another look at the paragraph of “*Ahabath Israel*,” we find that Scholem actually concludes with firmly asserting that “I regard you wholly as a daughter of our people, and in no other way” (SAE, 242). The transgression of lacking in “*Ahabath Israel*” and its highly problematic consequences would still not disqualify from being a member of “us,” apparently. Or wouldn’t they? After all, Scholem clearly does not just assert a matter of fact but a matter of his conviction, creating thereby the aura of ambiguity (i.e., if this is a simple fact, why the need to stress Scholem’s conviction?).

Indeed, the best way to understand Scholem’s concluding remark is probably not taking it to reflect simply on an already given fact, to describe merely Arendt as a natural member of “us,” but to perform, as Judith Butler understands it, an *interpellation*.³⁴ Interpreted as an interpellation, “I regard you” immediately transforms Arendt as recognizable within “our” moral discourse of “*Ahabath Israel*.” The simple act of “description” immediately constructs her as a moral subject. Yet it is important to note once again that by the time Arendt is constructed in terms of this moral discourse and community, she has already been virtually expelled from it: she is a “natural” member of “us” who nonetheless transgresses the political-moral boundaries this “natural” belonging would *naturally* prescribe for her.

³⁴ Cf. “[l]anguage sustains the body [i.e. the natural and descriptive] not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather, it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible.” Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), 5.

However, if it is exactly this “natural” category of “us” that prescribes for her to behave/feel/think according to a certain framework, and if her “little trace” of it results in antisemitism – why shouldn’t “we” simply let her go? Why should “we” regard her as a daughter of our people, and not assert instead that the boundary has indeed been crossed, and from this moment on she can only appeal to authorities *outside* of the descriptive-yet-prescribing realm of “us”?

There is, I think, only one answer that can be deduced from Scholem’s text: there is no way out.

Indeed, if we examine two hitherto unexamined characteristics of the “I regard you” utterance, it is exactly this claim that we find to be implicitly advanced. Namely, what Scholem says is that he regards Arendt “*wholly* as a daughter of our people, *and in no other way*” (my emphases). Not only is therefore the authority of “*Ahabath Israel*” established by him. It is established as an exclusive and ever-present authority. Needless to say, he is not blind to the fact that Arendt is a woman, a political theorist, an American citizen born in Germany, and so on. Yet, at this moment of reckoning, all of this does not count, as an account must be given in terms of only one category. At this trial of her book, Arendt is a Jew, only a Jew and nothing but a Jew.

But, to probe one step further, what warrants the applicability, relevance and, most importantly, exclusivity of this political-moral framework? Why would Scholem’s proclamation of “I regard you wholly as a daughter of our people” and its subsequent firm assignment of Arendt to a political-moral framework (that she has already been depicted to transgress) be an authoritative rhetoric? In other words, why *cannot* Arendt’s conduct be evaluated in terms of other, perfectly just moralities (say, Kantian or Christian)?

At the root of the *authority* of the authority, it is the spectre of the Jewish antisemite that haunts us again; the *Jewish* antisemite, that is. For up to this point, we have not yet attributed significance to Kurt Tucholsky’s ethnic origin (see page xx). This phrase,

Jewish antisemite, does not so much unveil the content of this particular antisemitism as it furnishes us with a particular genealogy of it. Subjects who are regarded by “*Ahabath Israel*” as daughters/sons of our people yet reject this call and the way of life it consequently subscribes will turn out to be antisemites.

Thus, to summarize and account for the *authority* of the authority in explaining the book’s unsettling failings, we can reiterate two defining characteristics. First, Scholem’s “*Ahabath Israel*” is an all-embracing, descriptive-yet-prescribing framework. Its force derives from the fact that, in principle, it defines and embraces the life of its subjects in their totality: for Arendt, in this framework, there is simply no escape from being Jewish, no escape from having to account for her conduct in Jewish terms. Second, it is also an exclusive framework in that even the escape from the way of life it prescribes may only come *in the terms of this framework*. As the Yoke of Heaven is replaced by the Yoke of Identity, the possibility of opting out of this framework in choosing to be a non-Jew becomes non-existent. The only way out of the exclusive relevance of Jewishness is to become the figure of the self-hating, antisemitic Jew – while the undoubtedly reprehensive nature of this sole path, in turn, makes the requirement of “*Ahabath Israel*” even more imperative.

The Jewish antisemite, then, is not simply the outcome of Gershom Scholem’s investigation, the final locus of what went wrong, but the element holding his very framework of inquiry, interpretation and attribution together. In constituting the only alternative possible to the identity which “*Ahabath Israel*” prescribes, it cements its legitimacy alongside the all-embracing and exclusive hold it has over its subjects.³⁵

³⁵ It is noteworthy that the right to leave the group is, by and large, sacrosanct even for contemporary communitarian accounts of politics. See Avishai Margalit and Moshe Halbertal, “Liberalism and the Right to Culture,” *Social Research* 61 (1994), 491-510; Michael Walzer, *Politics and passion: Toward a more egalitarian liberalism* (London: Yale UP, 2004). For an authoritative

It is time at this point to turn back to Arendt and investigate the features of her construction which consigned it to another extreme of the political spectrum. We have already seen how Arendt reacted to Scholem's interpretation and his political-moral request. To examine how her secular-universalist framework led to equally extreme judgments, it may also be worthwhile to investigate Arendt's answer to Scholem's "I regard you" utterance:

"I found it puzzling that you should write 'I regard you wholly as a daughter of our people, and in no other way.' The truth is I have never pretended to be anything else or to be in any way other than I am, and I have never even felt tempted in that direction. It would have been like saying that I was a man and not a woman – that is to say, kind of insane. I know, of course, that there is a "Jewish problem" even on this level, but it has never been my problem – not even in my childhood. I have always regarded my Jewishness as one of the indisputable factual data of my life, and I have never had the wish to change or disclaim facts of this kind. There is such a thing as a basic gratitude for everything that is as it is; for what has been *given* and was not, could not be, *made*; for things that are *physei* and not *nomoi*." (SAE, 246)

Of course, this passage may well be taken to demonstrate the fundamental rift between the correspondents. However, it may also reveal some crucial commonality. Arendt considers Scholem either to have denied her Jewishness or to have insinuated that she would not regard herself as Jewish. She then counters that it is, beyond a shadow of doubt, the fact of the matter. However, Scholem's original utterance did not so much deny

account on the connection between universalism and cultural claims see Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989).

this either. As reconstructed, “I regard you” was instead an interpellation, performing an indirect request. Factual or natural belonging was not an end in itself but prescribed a certain conduct: to display “*Ahabath Israel*.” Thus, Arendt’s point does not seem to answer Scholem’s utterance head on. The fundamental difference between them is not that according to Arendt “Hannah Arendt” is factually Jewish, while to Scholem she is not. Rather, it is that, according to Scholem, *because* she is Jewish, she will have to behave in a certain way. Arendt’s answer does not in any sense counter this conception.

Yet if this is so, these sentences then do not merely testify to the rift but also showcase an equally fundamental *agreement* between the two intellectuals. Simply, both regard *Jewishness* as something that cannot be renounced or left forgotten; something that is inalienable. For both of them, “the Jews” is a group of which there is no way out. It is just that the consequences each of them draw from this *fact*, this necessity, differ.

This agreement is not an inconsequential coincidence. We have already seen how this conception determined Scholem’s traditionalist framework and how its categorical nature (i.e. the impossibility to leave the group) lent the extreme character to his position. The more unequivocal and natural one’s Jewishness is, the more appropriate the request of “*Ahabath Israel*” will be. Furthermore, the closer “*Ahabath Israel*” embraces one, the lower is the chance that one will break out in any other form than the “Jewish antisemite.” But it may well be that, instead of being a mere anomaly in the logic of enlightened and universal rationality, the inescapability of Jewishness is an equally central and constitutive element of Arendt’s framework too. Namely, were it not for Jewishness being a matter of *physis*, of *natural necessity*, it could surely be admitted to the public realm of free deliberation. In fact, theoretically speaking, the more it is determined by nature, the less it can be admitted into the free and rational deliberation of (wo)men about the life they desire to live. And the less it can legitimately feature in politics, the more its actual presence will raise the suspicion of a quasi-totalitarian attempt to destroy the group in the political sense.

If this analysis is credible, therefore, we must then tentatively conclude that the basis of mutually exclusive frameworks, extreme interpretative judgments and enemy identities that have been identified in this exchange may all have actually been derivative of a fundamental agreement. The ultimate reason why the discourse broke down was the mutual if unacknowledged consensus between Arendt and Scholem that Jewishness is not something one can renounce and not something which freedom may have any impact on. Freedom, both in theory and practice, is either exclusively within Jewishness (Scholem) or exclusively outside of it (Arendt).

6. Concluding remarks

Some of the consequences of this categorical denial of the freedom to determine “who I am (*not*)” are already obvious. It made our correspondents reach extreme and mutually exclusive conclusions as regards Jewish moral responsibility during the Final Solution; and it positioned the other beyond the possibility of reasonable discourse. Thus, it did not simply create a traditionalist and a secularist version of politics, but made both of these incapable of discussion: where the question of who we are appeared to feature so prominently in the former that it blinded it to the outside world, and it was ruled out in the latter to the extent that it became incapable of engaging practices of the particular. As such, both in a theoretical and a practical sense, it was the consensus on the categorical inescapability of Jewishness and the impossibility to leave the group that may have been ultimately responsible for the absolute breakdown of discourse.

Yet it is likewise important to point out that the conception of the inescapability of Jewishness may also have had highly problematic bearings for the values and identities that the participants *themselves* wished to adopt.

Though Arendt occasioned “independence” as the opposite of “ideology” (see above, page xx), it was not a utopian plateau outside of Plato’s cave that she aspired to.³⁶ Independence was to take place within the community (if not within its established institutions and ideologies). In her construction, she explicitly singled out “patriotism” as a positive political value and as the possible identity position of herself (SAE, 247). She even suggested that parts of her book were “very pro-Israel” (SAE, 250). All this, as we remember, may be translated to her position of speaking as the representative of the threatened collective of “simple Jews” who did not want to play “any other role.”³⁷ To show solidarity and do nothing else, we can grant, is a viable and admirable act if this identity is determined by and adopted in a context of extraordinary and lethal adversity. Identification really is *the* pivotal political-moral value in this context. However, it is equally important to see that what we affirm there at that particular moment is not at all nature or *physis* but our solidarity with a group that has been created for destruction *by the aggressor*. Failing to realize this may lead to an impossible position as soon as the existential threat is over and the time of politics proper would start. There a political community must be forged, there political values must be adopted; and neither of this may be possible if the determining factor of our identity is still simply our identification, if we still aim to be “simple Jews” not playing any other role. Mastery of the “jüdische Sprache” as well as concomitant “disputes and arguments” are inevitable in that political community, and participation in them can

³⁶ Politically (if not epistemologically) speaking, Arendt thus spoke from the position of Michael Walzer’s “connected critique”. See Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (London: Harvard UP, 1987), 38.

³⁷ Cf. “[...] if one is attacked as a Jew, one has to defend oneself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as a world-citizen, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man, or whatever. But: What can I specifically do as a Jew?” Hannah Arendt, “What Remains? The Language Remains. A Conversation with Günter Gaus,” in: *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Jerome Kohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 1-23, esp. 12; cf. Hannah Arendt, “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing,” in: *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968), 3-31, esp. 17-18.

only be achieved if our identity is formed *within* that political discourse, and not outside of it.³⁸

But the conception of the inescapability of Jewishness may likewise have pushed Scholem to a position he would not necessarily have wished to adopt. At face value, this is a highly counter-intuitive assertion as his conception is in line with how the vast majority of Jewish tradition (whatever we may understand by this) treated the question of Jewishness and the (non-)possibility of Jewish apostasy.³⁹ However, it must be pointed out that when Scholem reconstructed Arendt's book as immoral by collapsing all categories into one homogenous "Jewish" unity (see [page yy](#)), what he utilized to construct the unity of "the Jews" was not *any* traditional (or indeed liberal) criteria. It was the practice of the Nazis. And in this sense, the point is not simply that they were *racially* defined but that in the eventual evolution of the Nazi use of the term, "the Jews" bluntly equalled the verdict "to be exterminated." This, of course, is also the sense in which Scholem used it when arguing against judging the Jewish people. But whilst to stand for those in their totality who were meant to be exterminated ("the Jews") is once again an admirable act, the confusion of this group with that of "us" that know "*Ahabath Israel*" may not be that fortunate. It would mean that – as the least common denominator of the category "Jew" will be (not tradition, not free choice and not even simply race but) the stamp "to be exterminated" – any further appropriation of this very category will imply an ever-present death warrant. And by the same token, if it is the inescapability of Jewishness that ultimately holds together *the Jews*

³⁸ For analyses of Arendt's similar stance on issues of identity, philosophy and politics, see Richard J. Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996), 184, 186; Jürgen Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power," in: *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, ed. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 211-229.

³⁹ See the chapter on apostasy in Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum, Noam J. Zohar and Ari Ackerman, eds. *The Jewish Political Tradition. Volume Two: Membership* (London: Yale UP, 2003), 310-440.

who should know "*Ahabath Israel*," just as it obviously held together the category of *the Jews* whose designation equalled the verdict "to be exterminated," then the community of *fate* may all-to-easily slip into the community of *dead(-in-waiting)*. Instead of freedom and the context of choice, the group will then stand for *death*.

As these last interpretative remarks have suggested, then, the sad exchange between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt was in the last resort an (mis-)encounter about freedom. It was not about lofty ideas on the sovereign power of human beings, nor about metaphysical claims of assuming our wished identifications, or heroically rejecting them all. The issue at stake was not the reduction of the question of who is or is not a Jew to the absolute (and, at the same time, impossible) conception of the pure *will*. It was about a rather simple and limited issue, to be sure, as far as freedom is concerned: the theoretical possibility of withstanding an authority and of opting out from membership of a community. The simple possibility to say, on occasion, that one is not a daughter or son of the Jewish people.

So why was this simplest of freedoms denied? Why, when it resulted in extraordinarily unbridgeable and angry political-moral disagreement? Why, when it led to impossible and bitter accusations and recriminations – and ultimately to the breakdown of conversation?

To understand these questions, there are two final considerations that we shall very briefly take into account. First, that the freedom both Scholem's and Arendt's conceptions eventually denied was that of the *not-so-simple solitude* that derives from claiming ultimate authority over who we are and standing under the starry sky as truly autonomous beings. And second, that at the point where we have now arrived, solitude/autonomy or authority, identity or freedom are not any more political, philosophical or moral concepts. The ultimate referent of the destruction of the common sphere may not simply be the

conception of the impossibility of being released from an identity, but the *visceral* inability of letting it go. Of letting them go.

And if this is so, we have then reached the outskirts of a realm into which we cannot progress; a realm that is only for the poet and the psychoanalyst.⁴⁰

Dávid Kaposi, Ph.D. (2008) Loughborough University. Lecturer in Social Psychology at The Open University (Milton Keynes, United Kingdom). Publications on violence, memory and dialogue include *Violence and understanding in Gaza: the British broadsheets' coverage of the war* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and *The crooked timber of identity: integrating critical, discursive and psychosocial analysis* (*British Journal of Social Psychology*, 2013).

⁴⁰ For a treatise on the psychological dilemma of what can and what should not be considered the property of human discourse, see Stephen Frosh, "What is outside discourse?" *Psychoanalytic Studies* 1(3) (1999), 381-390.