

The Problem with Judith Butler: The Political Philosophy of the Movement to Boycott Israel - Los Angeles Review of Books

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This is one of eight essays we published today on “Academic Activism: Israelis, Palestinians, and the Ethics of Boycott.” [Click here to read the others.](#)

WHEN AMERICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION PRESIDENT Curtis F. Marez gave his absurd “one has to start somewhere” answer to a New York Times reporter’s question as to why one should single out Israel’s universities for a boycott, one might have thought he had set the gold standard for empty boycott advocacy. But soon a still more vacuous contestant arrived. At the pro-boycott session on January 9 at the Modern Language Association’s 2014 annual meeting, University of Texas professor and panelist Barbara Harlow offered her own concise answer to the “Why boycott Israel?” question: “Why not?”

With advocates like these, one might think the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel would need no opponents. Certainly the public image of the humanities is not enhanced by remarks of this sort. But in truth many boycott supporters do not look for adequate reasoning. They want their existing passions inflamed still further. Palestinian BDS entrepreneur Omar Barghouti, who lectures regularly on US campuses, is adept at generating moral outrage in susceptible audiences. But the BDS movement also has more sophisticated spokespersons at its disposal. Judith Butler, who has become the movement’s premier philosopher and political theorist, is perhaps the foremost among them. Her work, which carries significant authority among humanists, helps us get to the heart of the movement’s guiding principles. The critique I will offer thus addresses the theoretical framing of the whole BDS movement by way of Butler’s approach to Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict. She has complained that pro-BDS arguments do not receive detailed analysis. I will make every effort to provide

that here.

I think it appropriate to preface an analysis of Butler's work by stating clearly that I believe she is sincere in advocating for the positions she has taken. In that light I set aside the somewhat artificial humility front-loaded into her influential 2013 talk at Brooklyn College ("I am not even a leader of this movement") as a technical distinction. And I completely believe that her journey toward boycott advocacy has been a trying one. That is especially convincing in her testimony in the 2013 Bruce Robbins film [Some of My Best Friends Are Zionists](#),^[1] though by the time she gets to the point of condemning Israel as "a pernicious colonialism that calls itself democracy" one may reasonably conclude that rage has supplanted trauma. As she suggests, she's an independent advocate, not a member of the BDS governing committee. But an intellectual leader in the broader sense she surely is. Her studied denial of virtually any persuasive intent ("I am not asking anyone to join a movement this evening") I count as merely performative. In view of the objectionable and misguided campaign to prevent her and Barghouti from speaking at Brooklyn College, a campaign that violated academic freedom, she had warrant to try to disarm the audience. Yet one does not need to carry a picket sign to join a movement. One can also participate by making a public intellectual and political commitment, and by writing on its behalf, as Butler herself has. She also gently assured the Brooklyn College audience that, for both her and Barghouti, "achieving unanimity [of opinion] is not the goal." She urged the audience to judge their arguments dispassionately, even though Barghouti's incensed recitation of purported Israeli crimes and violations of human rights encourages not dispassionate evaluation but self-righteous anger. Butler herself also finds such litanies of crimes — of "inequality, occupation and dispossession" — appealing. After all, she was not there just to expose the audience to ideas. She was there to persuade, and litanies of purported crimes can be persuasive.

The BDS Movement and the Academy: The State of Play

At the core of the BDS debates, unacknowledged contradictions abound. A standard BDS claim is that a university president who speaks out against academic boycotts is intimidating those faint faculty hearts on campus that would beat to a different drummer. In this age of administrative timidity, a presidential defense of academic freedom may be uncommon, but it remains part of the job; [many have consequently stood up](#) against academic boycotts. As Jonathan Marks points out in a recent Commentary piece ("[Academic Boycotters Talk Academic Freedom.](#)" January 24, 2014), the same BDS advocates who lauded Brooklyn College President Karen Gould when she quite properly defended her political science department's right to bring Barghouti and Butler to campus to speak have not adequately reflected on the fact that she is now among more than 200 college and university presidents opposing academic boycotts on the same grounds: defending academic freedom. The irony goes unnoticed among BDS acolytes.

One central BDS claim is that a boycott of Israeli universities targets institutions, not individuals. Yet in his Modern Language Association panel presentation, Barghouti conceded that individual faculty

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members would pay a price in an academic boycott. He simply said the price was worth it. It is disappointing then that Butler in a December 8, 2013, column in [The Nation](#) (“Academic Freedom and the ASA’s Boycott of Israel”) retained the mantra of denial, again asserting that “BDS targets institutions and not individuals”. It may well be that Butler believes this. She has friends who teach in Tel Aviv — including a progressive photographer and a filmmaker who focus on West Bank subjects — so it is unreasonable to imagine she wants to undermine their inter-collegial relationships, their mechanisms for professional advancement, or their academic freedom. Yet that is exactly what an academic boycott resolution will do. Her December column, the lecture she gave at Brooklyn College — the text of which appeared in the February 7, 2013, online issue of [The Nation](#) — her 2012 book *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, and [a 2004 essay “Jews and the Bi-National Vision”](#) are her major pro-boycott pieces and will be my focus here.

Although Butler says a boycott would deny Israeli faculty the right to use Israeli university funds to travel to conferences in the United States, she reassures us they would be free to “pay from their own personal funds.” This is hardly a realistic option for most of them, given that many have relatively low salaries. Indeed academic salaries in Israel are so low that universities provide funds for overseas travel in compensation. The fact that Israeli faculty would still be free to make the trip without financial support enables her to announce solemnly “that the only version of BDS that can be defended is one that is compatible with principles of academic freedom.” Indeed American Studies Association (ASA) leaders naturally object to any effort to prohibit universities from funding US member travel to ASA meetings. Both the American Association of University Professors and I strongly agree and consider such prohibitions to be violations of academic freedom. Either one honors this principle comprehensively, opposing any political litmus test on scholarly travel, or it will not be honored at all. At the very least, those legislators or pro-Israeli organizations advocating ideological restrictions on state-funded faculty travel should realize that, as political winds shift, these punitive measures may target their own constituencies in turn.

Travel is not the only serious limitation faculty would face. A significant number of American, Israeli, and Palestinian faculty are involved in interinstitutional research projects funded both by their own universities and by grants they administer. These critical collaborations would collapse under a boycott regime. Butler says she has “no problem collaborating with Israeli scholars and artists as long as we do not participate in any Israeli institution or have Israeli state monies support our collaborative work.” Refusing such financial support is a good deal easier for a philosopher than a scientist or an engineer who requires lab space, equipment, and staff to carry out research. Academic freedom includes the right to pursue the research of your choice, including collaborative research, and the right to pursue the funding necessary for that work. Butler dismisses the limitations a boycott would impose as a mere “inconvenience,” but faculty members who find their collaborative research projects on desalinization or solar energy torpedoed are certain to use stronger language.

Then she generates an unnecessary contradiction when she claims, “Academic freedom can only be

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exercised when the material conditions for exercising those rights are secured, which means that infrastructural rights are part of academic freedom itself.” Academic freedom protects your right to seek infrastructural support, but it does not guarantee you will get it. A physicist who cannot find the money to buy a linear accelerator has not had his or her academic freedom violated. The allocation of infrastructural support is determined by disciplinary, institutional, and political priorities, as well as available resources. Butler can certainly plead for more infrastructural support for Palestinian faculty, but it is a misunderstanding of academic freedom to make it the issue.

Fairness may well be an issue, but her dismissive “inconvenience” remark about available resources refers to constraints on Israelis, whereas her claim for the extension of academic freedom to funding addresses constraints on Palestinians. Israelis, meanwhile, are to be selectively denied one of the most common forms of infrastructural support: travel funds. Butler frequently fails to apply a principle in an evenhanded fashion or to distinguish between an abstract statement and its practical effects, a problem, as we shall see, that infects all of her writing about Israel and that makes the political appeal of the BDS movement problematic at best.

Butler and other BDS loyalists in the United States also seem not to understand that you cannot control the consequences of a political movement by putting a couple of sentences in a resolution or a manifesto. Some faculty in the United Kingdom have already felt morally and politically driven to put a “symbolic” or nonbinding boycott resolution into practice by boycotting individuals rather than only institutions. In May 2002, University of Manchester faculty member Mona Baker removed two Israeli academics, Miriam Shlesinger and Gideon Toury, respectively, from the boards of her journals *The Translator* and *Translation Studies Abstracts* because of their institutional connections to Israeli universities. Despite strong academic records, they were removed on the grounds of nationality and academic affiliation. Ironically, both were also committed human rights activists. Andrew Wilkie made news in June 2003 when he rejected an Israeli student who had applied to Oxford University because the student had served in the Israeli army. In May 2006, Richard Seaford of Exeter University refused to review a book for an Israeli journal, saying, “I have, along with many other British academics, signed the academic boycott of Israel.” These events and more are covered by David Hirsh in his [“Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism: Cosmopolitan Reflections.”](#) Some US university administrators are likely concerned about liability as a result of faculty or departmental actions that would count as discriminatory, especially admissions decisions made following a boycott endorsement. An academic boycott of Israeli institutions should be called out for what it is: a selective anti-faculty, anti-research, and antistudent agenda.

Although Butler endorses an academic boycott of Israeli universities, it is important to note that she also endorses a very broad boycott that would extend to all Israeli

cultural institutions that have failed to oppose the occupation and struggle for equal rights and the rights of the dispossessed, all those cultural institutions that think it is not their place to criticize their government for these practices [...]. When those cultural institutions (universities, art centers, festivals) were to take such a stand, that would be the beginning of the end of the boycott.

It is notable that most faculty members in the United States expect their universities not to take political positions. Doing so jeopardizes their tax status, but institutional neutrality in political matters also protects the right of individual faculty and students to take positions that differ from one another and avoids any implication that the university speaks for its students and faculty on political matters. Butler expects all these Israeli institutions to endorse the comprehensive right of Palestinian return that would abolish Israel as a Jewish state, dissolving the very government that funds those institutions.

Meanwhile, although Butler, Barghouti, and other key BDS spokespersons have unequivocally endorsed a Palestinian right of return, they insist that the movement currently has no “official” position on the matter, and thus that people who sign on to BDS petitions or otherwise endorse the movement are free to adopt their own stands. This amounts to a “bait and switch” operation, as people are hailed by calls for “justice” and then drawn into a movement whose past history and current advocacy in fact supports a more radical agenda.

A political litmus test for cooperating with Israeli universities, theater groups, symphonies, and art museums is bad enough, but their individual cooperation with this impossible demand would only begin the process of ending the boycott. It would continue, Butler writes, until “conditions of equality [...] are achieved.” Then the boycott would be “obsolete,” but then there also would be no Israeli institutions left to boycott. In case this leaves anyone anxious, she reassures us the BDS movement “seeks to use established legal means to achieve its goals.” Just what the legal mechanisms are for dissolving a nation she fails to say. Meanwhile the continual drumbeat of Butler’s references to “rights” and “justice” helps blind her audience to her real agenda. Those who do follow the implications of her words might reasonably conclude they amount to war by other means.

While the assertion that only established legal means would be required to dismantle the existing Israeli state may comfort US audiences, no such plausible route actually exists. Having supported their country through a series of wars, Israeli citizens are not likely to rise up in nonviolent revolution, Eastern European style, to overthrow it. An Israeli vote to dissolve the state would require a constitutional provision to do so and is equally improbable. A flotilla of US warships enforcing a comprehensive economic blockade is not a sound bet either.

Nonetheless, the nonviolence assurance has helped the movement. Boycott advocacy has now been enhanced by a series of pro-boycott or related resolutions introduced by other faculty associations. In addition to the ASA, the Asian American Studies and Native American and Indigenous Studies associations endorsed academic boycotts of Israel in 2013. Resolutions may be introduced in other academic associations during the 2014–15 academic year. Whether the BDS wagon train is gaining momentum is impossible to say, given that in November 2013 the American Public Health Association rejected a resolution that had attacked Israel for its medical practices toward Palestinians. But BDS is certainly getting more visibility. The MLA’s Executive Council had an opportunity in February 2014 to decide whether to call on its 30,000 members to vote on a resolution condemning Israel’s history of handling visa applications for American faculty seeking to teach or do research in the West Bank. And it

decided whether to take up a rejected call to express solidarity with the ASA by decrying intimidating notes, emails, or blog posts directed toward its members. Indeed the rhetoric of BDS presentations, documents, and essays does not always make it easy to be civil. Lack of empathy for the other side is a basic impediment to both campus debates and Arab-Israeli negotiations.

Butler and the Holocaust

Butler herself draws on a number of philosophical traditions in her attempt to construct the ideal identity and form of subjectivity for Jews worldwide, especially for Israelis. My concern is not so much with whether her readings of Emmanuel Levinas, Walter Benjamin, Martin Buber, Hannah Arendt, or others are accurate but rather with what she extracts from them in the service of her project to reform Israeli identity and her still more troubling goal of convincing readers that the State of Israel should be dissolved. As abstract, metaphysical speculation, her spiritual and argumentative journey toward what she considers ideal Jewishness would be fine. But it makes no sense to claim it, as she does, as a mandate for personal, social, and political change.

That said, her *Parting Ways* chapters on individual writers have definite virtues. The chapter on Primo Levi, for example, offers challenging reflections on motivations for Holocaust survivor suicide. Those passages are of interest whether or not Levi actually took his own life. Her analysis of the dynamics of Holocaust memory and representation is both sound and useful. She appropriately quotes Hayden White to the effect that Holocaust metaphors sometimes have “the effect of actually producing the referent rather than merely pointing to it.” That can help us understand Holocaust poetry’s potential for impact. Her primary motive in writing the chapter, however, is not to explicate Levi, but rather to use his doubts about Holocaust discourse to delegitimize the Israeli state. In an odd way, this turns Levi, the author of *The Drowned and the Saved*, who was a moral witness against injustice to Palestinians, into a voice warning us that Israel’s founding rationale and continuing existence are corrupt, even though Butler acknowledges that “in actuality he was taking a public stand against some Israeli military actions, not Israel itself” and “he clearly valued the founding of Israel as a refuge for Jews from the Nazi destruction.” Her bottom line is that Levi “asserts the ‘I’ that would not instrumentalize the historical memory of the Shoah to rationalize contemporary military violence against Palestinians.”

Who indeed could disagree that “it will not do to call upon the Shoah as a way of legitimating arbitrary and lethal Israeli violence against civilian populations?” As in all such matters, the most intense debates about the meaning and influence of the Holocaust in contemporary life occur in Israel itself and amongst Israeli citizens and authors alike. The two books Butler cites in support of her claim that Holocaust allusions are used to justify Israeli policy are Idith Zertal’s *Israel’s Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* (2005) and Avraham Burg’s *The Holocaust is Over: We Must Rise from Its Ashes* (2008). Both are Israeli authors. Zertal demonstrates that Holocaust references were widely used during Israel’s founding (when their relevance is a historical fact), during the 1948 war, when the fledgling state felt militarily threatened, and returned with every subsequent war. In my view, such allusions are warranted

today as the world faces the risk Iran will acquire nuclear weapons. Burg's claims are more inflammatory; he argues the Holocaust is used to justify every government policy and has permeated Israeli culture as a whole. Certainly Holocaust references do occur in political discourse, but they do not overwhelm Israeli policy making. I can find no evidence that the Holocaust is routinely invoked to justify every policy in the West Bank. There remains as well a chilling anti-Semitic, anti-Israel discourse among some Arabs and Europeans alike that invokes the Holocaust as unfinished business. We should recall, moreover, that in the first decade after Israel's founding about a quarter of the population were Holocaust survivors and many more had been powerfully affected.

That said, as Dan A. Porat points out in "From the Scandal to the Holocaust in Israeli Education," a 2004 essay in *Journal of Contemporary History*, the Holocaust was not front and center in Israeli public life in the country's first years. Nor did it play a significant role in Israeli education for decades. The country wanted to promote strength and pride, which made a story of mass slaughter counterproductive. When the Holocaust came up at all, it was often to celebrate moments of resistance like the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. The picture began to change with the Eichmann trial in 1961, which emphasized victim testimony, after which Holocaust commemoration became a more visible part of public life. Yet it was not until after the Yom Kippur War in 1973 and a heightened sense of national vulnerability that young Israelis took a major interest in the darkest period of Jewish history. That was finally reflected in the country's educational curriculum after 1980, and trips to Auschwitz became common. Before that, the Holocaust was consistently marginalized in Israeli high schools, which means that most senior Israeli politicians missed the Holocaust in their education.

The claim that young Israelis and the political culture are now obsessed with the Holocaust, however, is unsupportable. Is it the Holocaust that governs Israel's relations with European countries complicit in the Shoah? Is it the Holocaust that led Israel to cede territory to Egypt? The fact that some Israeli constituencies overuse and misuse Holocaust references does not justify condemning the entire state on that basis, as Butler would have us do. Menachim Begin, dead 30 years, used Holocaust allusions repeatedly, but Begin does not represent all Israeli politicians, then or now. Burg himself is a former Knesset Speaker. As a shorthand way to distinguish between history and current policy, I would say that the Holocaust helps justify Israel's founding but not building settlements on the West Bank.

Although Butler herself does not detail these arguments, the complaints about Holocaust references usually assert that they are used to exempt Israel from all moral responsibility for its policies and actions. As a homeland for history's ultimate victims, Israel's security needs consequently trump the rights at once of its neighbors and the Palestinians in the West Bank. According to anti-Zionist arguments, Israel's security thus falsely functions as a higher morality. Yet the very incommensurability between the Holocaust and the myriad local decisions required to maintain Israel's security should be enough to suggest that the Holocaust would not be routinely invoked whenever policies are being formulated or being put into place. Indeed, invoking the Holocaust would make most policy debates unintelligible. When the founding of the Israeli state is under discussion, however, the Holocaust is part of the

historical record.

As Seyla Benhabib has written in a detailed and thoughtful March 2013 essay review of *Parting Ways in Constellations*, “Had it not been for the Holocaust, the small community of idealistic dreamers in Palestine would have held the sympathy of the world Jewish community, but sooner or later they would have disappeared as a separate political entity.” On the other hand, as Dina Porat writes in Alvin H. Rosenfeld’s 2013 collection *Resurgent Antisemitism: Global Perspectives*, “Had there not been a 600,000-strong Yishuv (the Zionist Jewish entity that resided in pre-State Israel) the 360,000 survivors would not have found a shelter.” For Butler, as she argues in “Jews and the Bi-National Vision,” such accounts of the relationship between the Holocaust and the founding of Israel are not historical facts but merely “founding narratives,” which adopts a radical post-structuralism that denies any irrevocable relationship between historical fact and its inevitable narrative conceptualization. While one never gets past narrativity to arrive at absolute facticity, that does not mean there are no actual events and circumstances to be narrated. But for Butler it is imperative to “rethink and rewrite the history of the founding of the Israeli state” so as to “unlink the way in which the Nazi genocide continues to act as a permanent justification for this state.”

Half a century and more of debates about the meaning of the Holocaust have left an immensely complex legacy that doesn’t merit Butler’s reductive summary. Butler characterizes Holocaust references as a “cynical and excited recirculation of traumatic material — a kind of traumatic spree.” Since she has come up with that abusive language, one may fairly ask whether she, Barghouti, and others are doing anything else themselves with their litanies of anti-Palestinian violence? It was theologians and poets who first warned us that what the Holocaust teaches us about human beings leaves doubts about the meaning of life itself. Butler would have been better served by consulting Israeli philosopher Elhanan Yakira’s important *Post-Zionism, Post-Holocaust: Three Essays on Denial, Forgetting, and the Delegitimation of Israel* (2010). One conclusion we can draw from Holocaust testimony and Holocaust literature is that it casts a shadow over everything we say and do. That is the burden, among other texts, of Primo Levi’s utterly unsparing poem “Shema.”

Justice as an Ahistorical Abstraction

Foremost among Butler’s strategies in all her pro-boycott work — and central to her appeal and success — is the deployment of an abstract, universalizing concept of “justice” detached from any serious contextual challenges. In “Deconstructing Israel,” a January 2014 review first published in German in [Jungle World](#) and [then translated](#), Stephan Grigat points out that her main strategy is to mobilize an abstract and ahistorical universalism against all the historical particularities of Zionism. The main particularities she does cite are Israeli-imposed injustices suffered by Palestinians. But nothing happens to historicize the concept of justice itself in her work on the Middle East.

I have trouble accepting that this abstract version of justice is being deployed by the author of Gender

Trouble (1990), a book I have long admired, have taught repeatedly, and whose model of gender as socially and historically constructed (and thus learned and performed) I have pretty completely internalized. While gender and justice are concepts that operate in different registers, both are socially and historically constructed. An abstract notion of justice can serve as a social good and can hail people's sense of identity and patterns of behavior, but it has no place in discussions of the Middle East without historically -based qualifications. Like other BDS advocates, Butler takes political self-determination as an unqualified good for Palestinians, an end result that then becomes a sine qua non for any acceptable resolution of the conflict. Anything less than that, she believes, will not constitute justice. And Americans, especially on the left, like to believe they stand firmly on the side of justice.

Like other BDS proponents, she avoids any serious reflection on what would constitute political self-determination for Israelis, save for the implication that Israeli hearts can never really be at peace until Palestinians have secured all their wishes. That, however, is precisely what cannot be achieved in a "just" resolution of the conflict. For too many Palestinians "justice" means Palestinian sovereignty throughout the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, a dream that perhaps too many Israelis share in reverse, in the form of ambitions for a "Greater Israel," though it is not a majority view. The main Israeli constituency for that perspective is those far right West Bank settlers who believe they have a divine mandate to be there. If peace is to be achieved, many on both sides will have to relinquish a model of justice designed to benefit only one party to any negotiations. So would Butler if she were to imagine a solution adapted to political realities.

Everyone will have to settle for less than they imagine "justice" to entail. For neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis will give up their ambitions for sovereignty. Both sides will have to settle for less land over which their sovereignty will reign. The territorial compromises will have to include some way of establishing a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem. For some Jews that is a betrayal of a legacy at once religious and historical, a betrayal therefore of their notion of justice. Yet Jerusalem has evolved into a city with interwoven working relationships between Arabs and Jews and with public services that crisscross any conceivable boundaries. Some local cooperation will be necessary. We thus get nowhere by holding aloft a lantern called justice and letting it blind us to complexities of culture, history, and national desire, along with the realities of economic and social integration. That lantern also blinds Butler to the diversity of Palestinian experience and desire. As Benhabib writes,

The number of Arab youth who are now perfectly bi-lingual is growing and, along with it, their political capacity to engage Israeli society directly. Many Palestinian Arabs living in occupied East Jerusalem would much rather become Israeli citizens in an open and gender-egalitarian society than live under the Islamist rule of a party.

That is at least one reason why Butler cannot simply assert that non-Jewish Israeli citizens fundamentally feel unhappily bound "to a specific and controversial, if not contradictory, version of democracy." As a literature scholar, I might add this: does anyone imagine that the Palestinian novelists and poets who write in Hebrew would choose to dismantle the state of which they are citizens?

Butler's decontextualized, abstract notion of justice also helps her give strong literal endorsement to the Palestinian "right of return" to reside in Israel. They could choose compensation instead, she acknowledges, but compensation could not be the exclusive option. "People who have been made stateless by military occupation," she remarked to Open Democracy, "are entitled to repatriation." Yet an unqualified right of return policy means the end of the Jewish state. I believe it may be possible to endorse a qualified right of return as an abstract principle, not as a way literally to return to Israel, but as a way to regain something of what was lost, to acknowledge that wrongs were done, and so to confirm some version of belated compensation, while fully admitting that actual physical return cannot possibly be put into practice. Affirmation of the principle then becomes symbolic, a form of historical witness. Butler, however, cannot reliably negotiate distinctions between an abstraction and the complexities of social life. In truth many Palestinians want the right of return as a way to leverage the demographics of the Israeli state, so the symbolic statement would work only if it were clearly accepted as such in a negotiated agreement.

Again, Butler leaves the specifics of how the right of return would be put in place to speculation, but her conviction that Israel is an illegitimate state creates impediments. Is every existing deed to Israeli land to be voided? How can an illegitimate state issue new deeds that would be valid? Or are we to wait until the incorruptible Palestinian Authority can assign ownership? Perhaps an Oklahoma-style land rush can be scheduled, with Palestinians lined up on the border waiting till the starting pistol signals the chance to claim a homestead.

"It is not possible," Butler argues, "to restrict the problem of Palestinian subjugation to the occupation alone." Some confidently claim that if Israel unilaterally abandoned much of the West Bank — a solution I think may not only be morally and politically necessary but also inevitable if Israel is to save the soul of its democracy by freeing itself of an internal subject population — BDS would lose its *raison d'être* and would quickly wither away as an organization. But everything Butler says argues for the opposite outcome. So long as the children and grandchildren and extended families of Palestinians who once lived within Israel's 1948 borders cannot return to surviving homes, she believes, so long as they cannot return to rebuild villages razed in 1948 or later, justice will not be served. Indeed, as early as her 2004 essay "Jews and the Bi-National Vision" she called for "the just reallocation of arable land" in Israel proper. Contrary to Butler, it is entirely possible, politically possible and logically possible, to confine the problem of Palestinian subjugation to the West Bank. She doesn't like that possibility, but that does not make it logically or politically impossible. Subjugation, moreover, hardly describes the status of Palestinian citizens within Israel proper. Whatever inequalities affect Israel's Arab citizens could be more readily resolved if the threat of a Palestinian majority were taken out of the equation. But Butler and too many other BDS supporters insist that threat of a Palestinian majority must become a reality, just as it remains a sacred principle for some Palestinian political groups.

Unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank is not likely to involve abandoning all the settlements, because it would be politically impossible to do so absent an agreement, but it should be possible to

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withdraw from at least 90 percent of the West Bank. Complete withdrawal would leave Palestinians no incentive to negotiate further and thus no way to agree on territorial swaps. Israel would also face serious security risks, not the least of which is fear of a Hamas takeover on the West Bank. In the end, real peace cannot be achieved without an agreement that provides for Israeli security. Nor would partial withdrawal relieve Israel of all international pressure. But it would involve abandoning all settlements (including Hebron) except those close to the border and thus separate Israel from large numbers of Palestinians, which would change the nature of and basis for international protest and undercut the popular left claim that Israel is a colonialist power. If most of the West Bank were free of an Israeli presence, it would in effect be a preliminary Palestinian state, one achieved without resolving the most difficult problems, but one that would give the two-state solution significant inertial force. It would also eliminate many of the oppressive features of West Bank Palestinian life, or at least those that are consequences of Israeli policy, an outcome that must occur sooner rather than later. In numerous publications Peter Beinert has pioneered the use of the term “nondemocratic Israel” to describe conditions on the West Bank. That seems a useful way to distinguish the West Bank from the robust democracy that prevails in Israel proper. If current negotiations fail, I believe Israel has no choice but to abandon its undemocratic zone. Support for that deadline could help pressure the current Israeli government to negotiate in good faith.

Internal resistance to unilateral withdrawal has increased because many Israelis feel the withdrawal from Gaza has been less than a rousing success, given what Gaza has become. Israelis have faced the culmination of the struggle between Fatah and in a Hamas victory in 2007, a continuing series of rocket attacks on Israel, and such cultural changes in Gaza as the imposition of limitations on women’s rights — none of which the BDS movement has seen fit to criticize. Nor has Butler. In a 2006 Q&A at a UC Berkeley teach-in, Butler [remarked](#) that “understanding Hamas, Hezbollah as social movements that are progressive, that are on the Left, that are part of a global Left, is extremely important,” that despite their official state department classification as terrorist groups. Her modest qualification — “that does not stop us from being critical of certain dimensions of both movements” — does not really undercut her basic claim.

In a 2012 Mondoweiss piece Butler backtracked by saying “those political organizations define themselves as anti-imperialist, and anti-imperialism is one characteristic of the global left, so on that basis one could describe them as part of the global left” and repeated her rejection of state violence, but still could not quite bring herself to condemn [Hamas explicitly](#). If asked to comment on a particular suicide bombing with named civilian casualties, Butler would presumably repeat her standard “I reject violence” rejoinder. Actually naming a specific terrorist attack and condemning Hamas for it is apparently unpalatable for her. Nor is she inclined to admit that Hamas is a fundamentally anti-Semitic organization. Nonetheless, in my view, despite Hamas’s ascendancy, Israel is still better off without Gaza than with it. Ari Shavit, in his recent *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel* (2013), acknowledges that but suggests the experience of withdrawing from Gaza may recommend a more staged withdrawal from the West Bank. The Jerusalem Post reported similar recommendations by

Amos Yadin, a former Israeli chief of military intelligence, in [an article](#) by Herb Keinon published on January 27, 2014.

Anti-Semitism and Butler's Agenda for Jewish Identity

The context for Butler and others in the United States is different from that for Palestinians and Israelis. She is not prey to a desire to live in an ancestral family home in Tel Aviv, clinging instead to a distinctly American politics based on an idealist fantasy of historical possibility. She holds out the ideal of “a just and peaceable form of co-existence,” of “a place beyond war.” But that place for her has a name, Greater Palestine, and it has a people in command, Palestinians. This peaceable kingdom fantasy, of a binational state in which everyone just “gets along,” has great appeal to the American left, which partly explains Butler's immense political appeal. It is an abstract, idealist solution — underwritten by Edward Said's equally unrealistic observation that Israelis and Palestinians are both diasporic peoples whose parallel histories should generate compatibility — that neither Middle Eastern politics nor history can deliver. Are Jews who have lived all their lives in Israel supposed to have inherited their diasporic souls genetically? Or did they acquire this identity by listening to stories of their grandparents' lives?

There are of course traditions of assigning common psychological identities to racial, ethnic, sexual, and religious groups, but that has hardly been an admirable enterprise. One may cite Otto Weininger's immensely popular *Sex and Character*, published in Vienna and Leipzig in 1903, as an example. Its main point was to argue that women have no souls, but in the 13th chapter, “The Jewish Character,” Weininger points out that the Jews are a “feminine race” and thus have no souls either. Nor, he adds, do they play sports or sing. Jews, he advised, need to resist their fundamental nature. Butler of course wants Jews to succumb to theirs, and she thinks it a virtue, not a flaw, but this reopens the territory to less positive and fundamentally racist speculations about Jewish identity. This game cannot be controlled once the play begins. Jews have a collective shared history, but that does not install a uniform character in people with different life histories and nationalities.

Butler's fantasy notion that Israeli Jews would willingly submit to Arab rule is grounded in yet another hypothetical piece of invented diasporic psychology: “one of the most important ethical dimensions of the diasporic Jewish tradition, namely, the obligation of co-habitation with those different from ourselves.” In *Parting Ways*, as Benhabib points out, Butler develops her distinctive notion of cohabitation as an ethical imperative from a reading of Hannah Arendt: “This is a strange attempt to interpellate Arendt for Butler's own social ontology via the use of terms, such as ‘cohabitation’ that are not Arendt's at all.” It is an effort “to tease out what she calls a ‘principle’ out of Arendt's text.” “This may be Butler,” Benhabib concludes, “but it is certainly not Arendt. Arendt writes of ‘plurality’ and not of ‘plural cohabitation.’” Most importantly, Arendt considered plurality part of the human condition, not something particular to the diasporic experience of Jews.

It is remarkable that Said himself believed this tenuous level of identity could sustain a shared national

allegiance, especially given that the Palestinians blame the Israelis for their diasporic condition. But perhaps, as Butler suggests, Said was just conducting a thought experiment. Of course there is a certain kind of theorist who does not readily distinguish between a thought experiment and a policy proposal. Butler's own analysis does not embody a responsible account of history; instead it is divorced from it and presents a grave danger were it to become the centerpiece of US foreign policy. Meanwhile, it represents a delusional form of false consciousness for American students and faculty. Butler is marketing a very unhealthy drug to her readers. But they love the high it gives them, grounded in a confident and absolute division between good and evil and a vision of transcendent justice that justifies the absolute victory of the former over the latter.

There is a signal moment in Butler's 2013 Nation essay, easy to overlook, when we can see the price a frustrated idealist can exact when real bodies embedded in history are subjected to the idealist gaze. It is when she engages those "smaller forms of binational cultural communities in which Israeli Jews and Palestinians live and work together." There have been local realities of this sort repeatedly over the last century in Palestine, and they persist in some places and in some contexts today, despite the wave of nationalist sentiment that swept through Palestinian communities in the 1920s and 1930s and that transformed the conflict thereafter.

What is astonishing and disturbing in Butler's analysis is that she finds the lives of such people inadequate and unacceptable unless they take on the larger oppositional agenda she wants to promote. Ten years ago, in "Jews and the Bi-National Vision," she was comfortable hoping that "modes of civil and economic cooperation would lead organically to a form of government that would be based on a shared way of life between Arabs and Jews." She imagined then that "such alliances could provide the foundation and the model for collaborative associations seeking non-violent and just solutions to conflicts that appear intractable." Now she displays the impatience that frustrated utopians on the left and the right have shown many times when people in local communities are satisfied to live their lives as they see fit. "The only question," she writes, "is whether those small communities continue to accept the oppressive structure of the state, or whether in their small and effective way oppose the various dimensions of subjugation and disenfranchisement." Coexistence is insufficient, misguided, lacking, unless it matures to join "solidarity struggles." "Co-existence becomes solidarity when it joins the movement that seeks to undo the structural conditions of inequality, containment and dispossession." Of course, then it is likely to cease being coexistence. Discontent with those uninterested in reshaping their lives to fit an overarching political agenda not infrequently produces intolerance and violent strategies — leaving millions of dead in the USSR in the 1930s and again, decades later, in Cambodia. What is one to do in the end when people just will not listen to those who know better? They will need to be reeducated. It will require a cultural revolution.

Butler makes much of the nonviolent character of the BDS movement. It is "the only credible non-violent mode of resisting the injustices committed by the state of Israel." I suppose she believes that because BDS works through discourse and protest. And it is nonviolent as a fantasy structure. Butler invokes this

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fantasy when she protests that the “BDS is not the same as Hamas.” Of course they aren’t the same. BDS is a political movement, though one that offers no real prospect of improving the lives of the Palestinians it proposes to speak for, and Hamas is at least partly an armed terrorist group, though its role in Gaza has led it to provide social services as well. Like it or not, however, the BDS movement and Hamas share the same goal, the elimination of the Jewish state, and Hamas has hardly embraced nonviolence. BDS and Hamas are conceptually and politically linked, even though Butler and BDS assume a peaceful transition to majority Palestinian rule is plausible. The Jews give up the state of Israel and with it all their religious and political commitments and submit to a Palestinian majority. I have not heard the related left fantasy for some years, for obvious reasons, but before suicide bombers visited Israeli cities and crude Qassam rockets arrived from Gaza, leftists sometimes characterized Palestinians as uniquely peace-loving and gentle among all the peoples of the earth. We like to project our fantasies of extra-human virtue onto political victims, but doing so makes them something other than what they are.

Nonetheless there is a remnant of that celebratory left dichotomy in what Benhabib describes as Butler’s “simple equivalences between rationalism, the sovereign subject, Eurocentrism, and Zionist colonialism.” Opposed to this outdated epistemology of mastery is what Butler sees as a blameless anti-colonialist Palestinian resistance movement, but, as Benhabib adds, “We know that anti-colonial movements are not always emancipatory and that political action in the name of oppressed peoples can also carry the seeds of oppression within it.” Butler, she concludes, “seems beholden to an anti-imperialist jargon of the politics of purity.”

Butler sustains the relative purity of the opposition in part by minimizing its anti-Semitism. “Some forms of Palestinian opposition do rely on anti-Semitic slogans, falsehoods, and threats,” she writes, and “all these forms of anti-Semitism are to be unconditionally opposed.” Thus she reduces Palestinian anti-Semitism to a rhetorical strategy, trivializing its significance, and discounting what Israelis know to be true: that anti-Semitism sometimes represents deep-seated conviction. Even the most vocal of Israel’s internal critics acknowledge the level of local and regional anti-Semitism Israel faces. Thus Israeli faculty member Eva Illouz, a fierce critic of Israeli policy, [writes](#), “Some Palestinians are virulently anti-Semitic and are supported by even more violent anti-Semites in the surrounding Arab countries.” It does little good for Butler to denounce slogans confidently — though also, oddly, often in the passive voice — when what Israel is actually confronting is long nurtured hatred and resentment, as if Palestinians, by censuring their language, could reform their feelings and beliefs as well. Part of what we now know in full detail, courtesy of Jeffrey Herf’s 2010 *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, is that German anti-Semitic radio broadcasts in Arabic in the 1930s and 1940s helped prepare the ideological grounds for opposition to Israel and the first Arab-Israeli war.

Nor does it help to address anti-Semitic impulses within BDS philosophy by defensive denial — countering that “it would appear that no oppositional move [...] can take place without risking the accusation of anti-Semitism.” Israel is surrounded by undemocratic regimes intolerant of religious

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diversity. While it may be a conflicted democracy with serious problems, Israel proper remains a remarkably free society by any comparison with its neighbors, so one may fairly wonder why American BDS followers single it out as a rogue state. Is one left with the flippant “Why not?” response? Dialogue with anyone who argues that any criticism of Israeli policy amounts to anti-Semitism may be impossible, but a defense of the BDS movement that defends its challenges to Israel’s existence with a blanket denial of anti-Semitism is no better than its more extremist opposition.

In the end, one of the key cultural and historical traditions that makes it possible to isolate Israel conceptually and politically from all other nations is anti-Semitism. It is the long and abiding international history of anti-Semitism that makes Israel not only available to be singled out but also always already othered, set apart. Anti-Semitism is a fundamental condition of possibility for unqualified opposition to the Israeli state. It is certainly not the only impulse underlying opposition to Israel. Some feel betrayed by conditions on the West Bank because they long championed Israel as an example of liberal democracy. But opposition to Israel also provides anti-Semitism with its contemporary intellectual and moral credibility. Anti-Zionism is thus anti-Semitism’s moral salvation, its perfect disguise, its route to legitimation. Absolute opposition to Israel’s existence increases anti-Semitism’s cultural and political reach and impact. Arguments about whether a given opponent is or is not anti-Semitic are thus necessarily at least in part irrelevant. If you augment and empower anti-Semitism unwittingly, it may not matter what is in your heart. In that light, denial of anti-Semitism among those who reject Israel’s right to exist counts only as affirmation. Thus Barbara Harlow’s seemingly idiotic answer “Why not?” actually speaks to the existential reality. Why not single out the country that already stands alone in our minds? Indeed it stands alone in the minds of Jews and non-Jews alike.

Some Jews, including some who testify in the Bruce Robbins film, experience an overwhelming need to expel Israel from themselves, to convince both themselves and everyone else that they do not harbor it —, to use a Derridean metaphor — encrypted within. That helps explain the intensity with which some Jews reject the very existence of an Israeli state. And yet for Jews Israel always seems to be encapsulated, warded off within, so their passion for expelling it escalates. It is a dynamic and progressive process. The well known accusation of Jewish self-hatred is thus a simplification and a slander. They hate and fear but part of themselves. Asked why they are determined to condemn Israel for practices comparable to those many other nations engage in, some Jews claim their right to do so as a birthright. At public events, most recently at MLA in 2014, Bruce Robbins always responds to the “Why Israel” question by answering “because I am a Jew, and I object to what Israel is doing in my name.” He delivers the statement with enough anguish and vehemence so as to forestall further discussion. As I suggest in *No University is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom* (2010), I have heard some opponents of Israel speak with such uncontrolled venom that I am convinced that they are anti-Semitic, whether they know it or not, but I would not say that of either Butler or Robbins.

Yet anti-Semitism, it is critical to realize, is an inescapable, enabling condition underwriting the possibility of castigating Israel on grounds on which it is the same or similar to other countries, not different from

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them. Worse still, Israel's sameness actually applies not to fact-based comparisons but rather to the programmatic invocation of cultural and political categories: Israel discriminates against segments of those under its control; Israel is a religious state, and we object to religious states on principle; Israel's warrant to exist as a nation state implicates power dynamics, not some inevitable destiny; other populations believe they have equal or greater right to the land; Israel's borders have not remained the same since its founding; Israel's human rights record in areas over which it exercises control is imperfect. All these concerns are less applicable to Israel than to more than a score of other countries in the Middle East and elsewhere, yet BDS advocates consider Israel alone a pariah among nations. It is no surprise, moreover, that BDS advocates discount both past and future violence against Israel and that anti-Semitism makes it possible to do so. Everything that might be done to a group of Jews has already been done, has already happened. Such violence is not a risk; it is a historical given.

In the context of celebrating BDS nonviolence, Butler dismisses as categorically absurd the accusation that BDS rhetoric is a form of hate speech. She also rejects the argument that hers and other BDS arguments have "spawned a set of variations" that include "hate speech directed against either the State of Israel or Israeli Jews." Certainly we must agree that rational arguments against Israeli policy do not constitute hate speech. There can be no meaningful political dialogue or debate unless people are free to criticize a nation's policies. The problem arises with Barghouti's, Butler's, and BDS's intense and unqualified rejection of the Jewish state and with all the moral outrage they direct toward Israel. That moral outrage is not directed toward Israeli policy alone. It is an existential and political rejection of Israel's right to exist. It is filled with hostility. And it does encourage still more inflamed rhetoric that crosses the line into hate speech. Hate speech can and does promote violence.

Suffice it to say that there is no nonviolent way to transition to Judith Butler's peaceable kingdom and no reason either to suppose the kingdom would end up being peaceable. "Is it possible," she asked in Brooklyn, that words might "bring about a general ethos of non-violence [...]" As a political theory, that speculation and the BDS goal she offers for Palestine has no relation to reality. It is a fantasy that could only play out in violence. However nonviolent the fantasy is in intent, therefore, it could only be violent in effect. That said, I am convinced Butler believes this nonsense. While she may have been merely performative in her lead-in to The Nation piece, I believe she had drunk her own Kool-Aid by the end: "My wager, my hope," she writes, "is that everyone's chance to live with greater freedom from fear and aggression will be increased as those conditions of justice, freedom, and equality are realized." At that point feelings of ecstatic self-love sweep over the American audience and the applause rises. They can imagine themselves to have entered that "ec-static relationality, a way of being comported beyond oneself, a way of being dispossessed from sovereignty and nation" that Butler repeatedly invokes in Parting Ways. Of course that illusion of a move beyond nation is one that American exceptionalism and power has itself made possible for its citizens. It would not find such a warm reception in the Middle East.

Although those who have not read basic histories of Israel may not realize it, Butler does invoke the right

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context for discussions of the origins of the Arab-Israeli conflict. She realizes that the incompatible “claims of 1948” still underlie positions today. Unfortunately she overlays those competing claims with the absolutist moral stance that dominates BDS discourse. Instead of acknowledging competing claims for national identity and sovereignty over the land, she contrasts the “Israeli demand for demographic identity” to “the multivalent forms of dispossession that affect Palestinians.” In other words, what are in fact parallel but competing nationalist and religious ambitions are transformed into a simple binary of Israeli dominance and Palestinian subservience.

The history of the Jewish people in the land of Israel, the land’s connection to Judaism, all this has no meaning for her. She simply “eschews the Zionist linkage of nation to land.” Instead of seeing the conflict as one between two peoples with indigenous ties to the land, she credits only one. Justice is thus all on one side, and the conflict is to be resolved by granting the Palestinians everything they wanted from the outset, from the moment that war broke out on November 30, 1947. In *Parting Ways* Butler explicitly lists “the massive dispossessions of Palestinians in 1948” as one of the wrongs that must be righted. Indeed she goes on to say misleadingly that “Israel has been built on a series of land confiscations that preceded 1948.” A very frank account of violence on both sides may be found in Benny Morris’s *1948: The First Arab-Israeli War* (2008). Ari Shavit’s powerful and disturbing chapter “Lydda, 1948” has also convinced many for the first time that they need to recognize why that year was a tragedy for the Palestinians. For Butler, importantly, not only are the 1967 borders illegitimate. There are no legitimate borders. She believes that a fully ethical Judaism would lead one to reject the whole existence of a Jewish state, not just its policies. Does she really think she can preach that sermon to Jews worldwide with a commitment to a Jewish state, let alone to Israelis themselves? If not, what is her audience for that argument, and what would their motives be for endorsing it?

Butler disparages “the football lingo of being ‘pro’ Palestine and ‘anti’ Israel.” “This language is reductive,” she adds, “if not embarrassing.” But what her decontextualized and ahistorical notion of justice allows her to do is to duplicate exactly that dichotomy by way of a moral economy of right and wrong. Repairing all the components of Israeli “injustice” then becomes the one priority and the only goal for the region. And we are assured that the result “might one day become a just and peaceable form of coexistence,” that is, if we create a state with a Palestinian majority, a state that by its very nature grants “justice” to only one of the parties to the equation. But Butler in fact maintains that justice only inheres in the Palestinian cause. For her there is no valid case to be made for Israelis as citizens of a Jewish state. In the rhetorical economy of her work there are no competing arguments. It is a conflict between truth and error. That model provides no basis for either negotiation or compromise. It foresees only a basis for continuing struggle and eventual Israeli capitulation.

Whatever willingness Butler herself might have to discuss these matters, moreover, does not carry over to the BDS movement as a whole. They accept the logic that transforms parallel claims into a moral opposition of right and wrong, infecting BDS discourse with a presumptive sense of moral superiority that need not be examined further. If you sign on to BDS discourse, you sign on to its conclusions. You do

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not need to think any further. That is why Butler's Brooklyn College invitation to a dialogue is in reality somewhat disingenuous. The BDS movement is not interested in reflection or conversation. The fraction of the American left that has adopted the BDS mantra thus revels in the confidence that they are in the right, whereas the only real hope for peace lies in a cold recognition that the opposing forces can only be accommodated by stable, negotiated forms of partition.

BDS discourse can only sustain this moral absolutism by erecting a series of prohibitions, prohibitions against speaking the words that must be spoken if honest discussion and debate is to proceed. There is first of all the virtual prohibition against mention of Palestinian violence. Butler gives no attention to (and shows no concern about) the effect on Israelis of a series of suicide bombings whose victims have included both Jews and Palestinians, along with continuing threats from Arab and non-Arab states in the region, Iran being the most worrisome. If she talked to someone who escaped an explosion at a favorite café by a few minutes, she might feel differently. Then there is the prohibition against granting any legitimacy to the concept of a Jewish state, along with the prohibition against admitting what the fate of Jews would be in an Arab-dominated state. And finally there is the "third rail" of all US debate over opposition to Israel, the role of anti-Semitism. As Robert S. Wistrich writes in his contribution to Rosenfeld's *Resurgent Antisemitism*, "Even to raise the issue is often considered by leftists and some liberals, too, as an act of Zionist 'intellectual terrorism' primarily designed to silence justified opposition toward Israel." In an effort to counter this strategy, faculty here and abroad have been working to turn the issue of anti-Semitism in anti-Israel groups from a prohibited topic into a valid academic subject for research and analysis, and they have made notable progress. As I suggested above, it is not that "any and all criticism of the State of Israel is anti-Semitic" (*Parting Ways*), the sad defensive position that Butler unnecessarily debunks, but that any solution that involves dismantling the Jewish state is anti-Semitic in effect and fueled at least obliquely, as Butler seems not to understand, by anti-Semitic traditions that make the needs of a long dispossessed people, the Jews, either secondary or expendable. Many BDS advocates simply become agitated when the subject is broached, especially in conversation, branding suggestions that Jews would fare poorly indeed under Arab nationalism and Muslim fundamentalism as themselves irrational.

In addition to its prohibitions, BDS has its epithet of choice: Zionist. Butler helps solidify that epithet, as Alan Johnson points out in a January 2013 review of *Parting Ways* in *Fathom*, by creating

what Marx would have called an 'ahistorical, eternal, fixed and abstract conception' of the history of Zionism and Israel from which is missing actual experience and real emergence, from which has been erased all concrete differences (between periods of Israeli history, between different wings of Zionism, between different political parties within Israel, between different Israeli social classes).

There are other Zionisms in her account, but not constitutive of the monolithic Israeli state she has constructed. Indeed, although she acknowledges "the singular history of Jewish oppression," her theory of Jewish identity relies on the same unitary model of Jewish history, homogenizing it as a rich broth exhibiting multiple forms of cohabitation with non-Jews. That leaves all Jews, though some would be

surprised to learn it, with identities founded in “an impurity, a mixing with otherness [...] an ineradicable alterity.”

Butler makes the absurd demand, in fact fully in play for over a century, that “the historiographical presumption of progressive history that supports the idea of Zionism as the unfolding realization of an ideal can and must be countered by a critique of that form of progressivism.” Has she read any reliable histories of Israel? She could start with Anita Shapira’s *Israel: A History* (2012). The history of Zionism is complex and different and never without self-critique. Zionists often had competing and contradictory aims and beliefs, but now it seems mere belief in the validity of a Jewish state can be belittled as a Zionist obsession, often with the implied slander that Zionism equals racism. That is certainly where a portion of the American left, including a segment of the Jewish left, now stands. American Jews young enough to have grown up feeling fully assimilated find the controversy over Israel increasingly uncomfortable. It sets them apart, others them within the left in ways they have never experienced before. And so they seek sometimes to rejoin their comrades by paying the only price that is acceptable: defining the occupation as the very existence of the Jewish state and implicitly advocating its delegitimation and dissolution. Butler gives them the arguments they need to persuade themselves that process could be nonviolent. In clinging to that illusion they join a long and troubled tradition of Jews who flee their heritage out of fear and a desire for acceptance.

In *Parting Ways* Butler makes it clear that for Israeli Jews this would entail an “obligatory passage beyond identity and nation as defining frameworks” so as to conceive “complex and antagonistic modes of living together.” Palestinians, a subjugated people, are apparently not required to abandon nationalism. Toward the end of *Parting Ways* she poses this as a question: “Do we want to oppose the nationalism of those who have yet to see a state, of the Palestinians who are still seeking to gather a nation, to establish a nation-state for the first time.” So until a Palestinian state fully embodies nationalism’s inevitable limitations and value distortions, Palestinian nationalist ambitions should remain intact and uncriticized. Tony Judt notoriously declared nationalism to be an anachronism in his influential 2003 *New York Review of Books* essay, “Israel: The Alternative,” but now, more than a decade later, ethnic nationalisms remain alive and well in Europe and elsewhere. At times the international anti-Zionist left muses that all nationalisms are on their way to being abandoned, but the exceptionalist treatment of Israel in practice means that all national aspirations are valid except that of the Jews.

What Butler, in a gesture of extraordinary arrogance, actually means is that binationalism requires Israeli Jews not only to cease being Israelis but also to cease being Jews. The history of both European and Arab anti-Semitism, we will remember, includes no few examples of such advice delivered in more violent rhetoric. In that light, Butler’s demand for “an indefinite moratorium on the Law of Return” that gives Jews worldwide the right to immigrate to Israel may seem almost modest. Since Israel is not a legitimate state, why should it have a right to an immigration policy? Stripped of its drama, that’s really all the Right of Return is: an immigration policy with a religious preference established by a state with a large religious majority in which religion and nationality are entwined — a state, however, in which other

religions flourish.

Some of Butler's critics have no difficulty labeling her anti-Semitic. I claim no knowledge of what is in her heart, but the accusation gets in the way of countering her specific arguments. The point she has difficulty addressing is that her positions have anti-Semitic consequences and lend support to anti-Semitic groups. She says two things in response: first, that opposition to the very existence of the state of Israel is not equivalent to anti-Semitism, since Jews should be ready to give up an outdated, fundamentally unJewish nationalism; second, that she is indebted to an alternative Jewish philosophical tradition that is more true to the heart of Judaism than the politics that drive her opponents. But it is to a significant degree a tradition she has had to construct, not one she has clearly inherited. And, in any case, that supposed intellectual loyalty has no purchase on political advice that would have disastrous consequences.

One State and the Right of Return

Where Butler is correct — and painfully so — is in asserting that there never was a possibility for a Jewish state in Palestine without the dispossession of Arab lands. What she does not trouble herself to confront is the fact that Jews purchased land prior to 1936 that was owned by wealthy Arabs, and that some tenant farmers lost their right to live there as a result. As Asher Susser writes in *Israel, Jordan, and Palestine: The Two-State Imperative* (2012), "Until 1948 the Zionists, as opposed to classical colonial movements, did not conquer the land, but bought it on the market from local as well as nonresident landowners." Jews also owned land in the region before the nineteenth century, and much of the land in the area fell under Ottoman administrative rule, rather than being in private hands. Nor in confronting the genuine tragedy of 1948 is she much interested in acknowledging that the Arab states launched a war against Israel that year. But the fact remains that Palestinians lost their homes and saw their communities destroyed. Displaced Palestinians should have been offered reconstruction of their villages on other Arab lands at the time. The US should have offered to cover much of the cost. But that option has been swallowed in the sands of time. Also missing — at least from Butler's account — is the fact that a comparable number of Jews were forced out of their ancestral homes in Arab lands as a consequence of the establishment of Israel; they and their descendants make up the majority of Israeli Jews today. I trust readers will understand why they are not demanding a Right of Return.

Does one find BDS supporters sympathizing with Jews from Arab lands who lost their homes, their lands, and their businesses? Not so far as I know. Do they call on Arab governments for reparations? Why is it that "justice" does not include full justice for those displaced Jews? For many Jews from Arab lands it was not the Holocaust they had to flee but rather the risk of a similar fate at Arab hands. If the creation of Israel intensified Arab anti-Semitism, it also gave Jews from Arab lands a haven and a home. Justice for them would not be enhanced by dismantling that home.

What can be made available as part of an agreement without destruction of the State of Israel is fair financial compensation to Palestinian families displaced in 1948. As part of its commitment to creating

two viable states in the region, the United States can shoulder most of the cost, with Israel contributing according to its ability. While few seemingly like to admit it, the relevance of a literal right to return has diminished as Palestinian adults living within Israel's 1967 borders have aged and died. It is likely that fewer than 10 percent of those who fled or were expelled in 1948 remain alive. Many of those were very young children at the time. The right of later generations to return to a home they have never seen or to a village that no longer exists seems at best chimerical. The principle is less a human right than a political weapon. Its emotional valence, to be sure, has been sustained by prolonged life in the refugee camps, during which people felt they had no home with a future. As Amira Hass, an Israeli critic of her country's policies has acknowledged in an essay published in Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller's collection *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory* (2011), "With the passing of the years, as many first-generation refugees age and die, the return home becomes increasingly transtemporal, metareal." The sense of loss is thus metaphysical, not material, and can be unlearned, especially if other benefits and possibilities accompany it. But a Palestinian state would be free to adopt its own immigration policy. Does anyone doubt that such a policy would give preference to returning Palestinians, as one would properly expect it to?

Once again, Butler deploys her abstract notion of justice to decry the contradiction between a right of return denied for Palestinians and a Law of Return affirmed for Jews. It is a contradiction, but it is one that Israel must sustain if it is to remain a Jewish entity. As United States history might have led Butler to acknowledge when she states in *Parting Ways* that "no democratic polity has the right to secure demographic advantage for any particular ethnic or religious group," some democratic polities have done precisely that; such rights are partly a function of historical circumstance and relative power. As Alexander Yakobson and Amnon Rubinstein point out in their comparative *Israel and the Family of Nations: The Jewish Nation-State and Human Rights* (2008), democratic polities in fact not infrequently seek demographic advantage. The Scandinavian countries have immigration policies that grant preferential treatment to other Scandinavians. Germany gives preferential treatment to ethnic Germans. Those are only two examples among many. BDS advocates typically either sidestep such detailed comparisons with other nations' policies and practices or they accept only irrational and unsupportable comparisons with the most odious states in modern history, namely Nazi Germany and white-dominated South Africa.

Butler claims that a UN resolution affirms the Palestinian right of return, but then a UN resolution established the State of Israel as well. That said, UN Resolution 194 does not actually speak of a right of return. What it says is that "refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so." As Asher Susser writes, "the resolution spoke of a permission that ought to be granted rather than an inherent right to return." Given that Resolution 194 came but a year after Israel was founded, it is reasonable to conclude that "living at peace" with one's Jewish neighbors did not entail opposing the state whose creation the Jews had just celebrated. The resolution was also part of a peace plan indexed to the conditions of the moment. There is no reason to suppose it stated a principle that should not be modified to reflect conditions more than half a century later. Ben

Gurion might well have been advised at the time for both moral and pragmatic reasons to make the return of refugees conditional, rather than refusing to accept any.

The opportunity for that solution has now passed. Divested of the West Bank now, however, Israel could make certain that no forms of discrimination persist within its borders. Israeli politicians should find the resolve now to do what a majority of Israelis want, for example, and make provision for civil marriages to be carried out within Israel itself. Legal means are readily available to bar discrimination in areas like housing, employment, and municipal services, and Israel must strengthen them to protect its Jewish minorities as well as its Palestinian citizens. Enforcement requires commitment, but that is not unimaginable either. Symbolic issues (the flag, the national anthem) will still mark difference, but the benefits of a democratic society can counter-balance them. Yakobson and Rubinstein add that Israel should also grant formal recognition to its Palestinian minority in its constitution. In other words, if what Butler actually wants is “that the State of Israel consider undertaking formal acts by which equality might be more inclusively allocated and contemporary forms of discrimination, differential violence, and daily harassment against the Palestinian people [be] brought to an end,” then Jews need neither ground their identities in diaspora nor dissolve their nation. They need to reform their laws to foster equality internally and abandon the bulk of the West Bank so the Palestinians living there can govern themselves. To be a refugee, to be stateless, is an unacceptable condition, but that does not mean Palestinian refugees need to live in Tel Aviv.

Despite these problems with Butler’s unreservedly idealist agenda, I want to conclude by acknowledging that I am convinced she believes in her “single state, one that would eradicate all forms of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, race, and religion.” The problem is that no major players in the Middle East believe that goal is realistic and most have no interest in it. When Palestinian political groups announce that they acknowledge the existence of Israel, they refer to a place where Jews and Arabs live. They do not typically intend to affirm Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state. That is not surprising, given that endorsing Israel’s Jewish identity conflicts with the goal of implementing a massive return of diasporic Palestinians that would turn Jews into a minority. Over time, the Naqba and the right of return have become the central features of the Palestinian historical narrative. Indeed, as Benny Morris argues in *One State, Two States: Resolving the Israel/Palestine Conflict* (2009), Palestinian insistence on the right of return is “code for the elimination of Israel and the conquest of all of Palestine.”

Other than wishful thinking, Butler really has no answer to the challenge Morris offers to happy-family prospects for the Middle East:

What Muslim Arab society in the modern age has treated Christians, Jews, pagans, Buddhists, and Hindus with tolerance and as equals? Why should anyone believe that Palestinian Muslim Arabs would behave any differently [...]?

In *Israel and the Family of Nations*, Yakobson and Rubinstein offer equally pertinent observations about why one state embodying all of Palestine would cease to have any Jewish character and would not be

hospitable for its Jewish residents:

In order to believe that such a state would in fact be binational, a number of wildly implausible assumptions need to be made: that the Arab-Palestinian people would agree over the long term that its state — the only state it will have — would not have an Arab character and would not be regarded as part of the Arab world; that it would agree to be the only one among the Arab peoples whose state would not be officially Arab, would not be a member of the Arab League and would not share, by declaration, the aspirations for Arab unity; and that the Palestinian people would agree to make this concession — a declared relinquishing of Palestine's 'Arabness,' something which no Arab nation has agreed to do in its own state for the sake of the non-Arab native minorities — for the sake of the Jews, widely considered 'foreign intruders' and 'colonialist invaders' in Palestine, whose very claim to constitute a nation is no more than 'Zionist propaganda.'

Meanwhile the troubling results of the Arab spring confirm Morris's tough judgment that "the Palestinian Arabs, like the world's other Muslim Arab communities, are deeply religious and have no [...] tradition of democratic governance." That doesn't mean Arab countries cannot develop democratic institutions over time, but it does mean that a minority Israeli population will have reason to fear that neither their rights nor their physical security would be guaranteed in the critical first years of a binational state's existence. Does anyone actually think Israelis would willingly sign on to that risk? Is that what installing their diasporic history in their identities is supposed to do for them?

By addressing only the most apocalyptic warnings about the risks of violence in calls for the abolition of the Jewish state, Butler is conveniently able to dismiss all lesser but still consequential risks of violence. If a BDS proponent argues that Israel is not a legitimate state, she complains, "that is taken to be a genocidal position," a "wish to see a given population annihilated." She can then come neatly to the conclusion that "no thoughtful discussion about legitimacy can take place under such conditions." Except for her idiosyncratic theory that Jews should so thoroughly internalize their diasporic history that they are led to embrace statelessness, however, there is little hope that anything but a bloodbath would follow upon an attempt to dissolve the Jewish state. BDS advocates protest that is an alarmist or "hysterical" response to a one-state proposal, but I believe instead that it is coldly realistic.

Given that Butler's diasporic identity theory is phantasmatic at best, one may reasonably ask why she invokes it. Perhaps, although she gives no sign of being willing to admit it, it is because she realizes at some level that the BDS movement is fundamentally and exclusively coercive. We might call it coercive non-violence, since it relies on the prospect of international pressure forcing the Israelis to do something they are otherwise powerfully disinclined to do. Thus she wants to offer them a route to delegitimation based on self-realization and inner transformation. Otherwise as Hussein Ibish writes in *What's Wrong with the One-State Agenda?* (2009), the idea that they would "let bygones be bygones, forego their national identities and independence and join the vanguard of enlightened humanity transcending the most fundamental of modern identity categories" is equally improbable. Unfortunately, Butler thus presents us with a twofold utopian model: first, Jews will take diaspora into their hearts, then Palestinians

will choose not to dominate a state politically, ethnically, culturally, and religiously that they will certainly dominate numerically.

In a July 2013 interview with [Open Democracy](#), Butler implies that Jews and Palestinians would learn to control “whatever murderous rage” they have, but I doubt if many outside the United States find that reasoning reassuring. In any case, it is hardly reliable to extend standards of familial and interpersonal relations to interactions between hostile political movements and nation states. Not that relations between heavily armed family members always work out well either.

There is also a broader lesson to be learned here. Butler’s mystical journey toward diasporic inwardness should lead us toward serious examination of the relationship between abstract theoretical speculation and the responsibilities entailed in making policy recommendations. Becoming enamored of a thought experiment, however elegant and internally logical it may seem, does not in and of itself justify either advocating or mandating its application to real world politics.

What Butler’s BDS-style one-state solution would actually produce is a Muslim Arab-dominated state devoted to ethnic cleansing of the Jewish population. But Israelis would not go peacefully into that dark night. They would fight. At best a civil war recalling the civil war following the Arab rising of 1936-39 would ensue, leading now to untold deaths of Jews and Palestinians and serious regional economic and humanitarian disasters. Of course we have Syria as a model for how much worse a civil war would be now. I do not accept a Holocaust analogy for the prospect, but I do believe at the very least we would see both general clashes and innumerable local acts of revenge. Butler’s claims of a nonviolent route to a single state are thus at best naïve and at worst genuinely dangerous. They bear no relation to reality. They demonstrate what happens when a brilliant theorist turns to real world politics she does not or will not comprehend. The binationalism she advocates, she acknowledges, “is not love, but there is we might say, a necessary and impossible attachment that makes a mockery of identity, an ambivalence that emerges from the decentering of the nationalist ethos and that forms the basis of a permanent ethical demand.” Good luck with that. Does she think millions of Arabs and Jews are mere clay she can mold to fit her fantasy ambitions for them?

Those who question where Butler’s heedless pursuit of an abstract logic of justice would take us should read very carefully the sometimes oblique sentences she crafts. In 2004 in “Jews and the Bi-National Vision” she simply declared that “the institution of a Palestinian state will not by itself nullify the claims to the land or the petition for restoration” and added “I don’t believe that the Israeli state in its current form should be ratified.” Now, toward the end of *Parting Ways* she suggests that any relationship with a Jewish state is morally and politically unacceptable. “Palestinians who have been forced to become diasporic” should not have to contemplate even a “colonial power” that “stays in place and out of sight.” According to her, the two-state solution would be psychologically and politically corrupted by the past. Palestinians would be living in juxtaposition with the embodiments of their former oppressors. “If coexistence requires working within the disavowed framework of colonial power, then colonial power becomes a precondition of coexistence.” This parallels Barghout’s argument in a 2009 [Electronic](#)

[Intifada](#) interview that coexisting Palestinian and Israeli states would create an unacceptable appearance of moral equivalence: “I am completely and categorically against binationalism because it assumes that there are two nations with equal moral claims to the land.”

Following this logic, the establishment of a Palestinian state will do nothing to stop the ongoing tragedy of the Naqba (the catastrophe of Palestinian expulsions), for a Palestinian state would still bear within itself, be the product of, that foundational and eternally intolerable expulsion. Butler’s reasoning is quite strange at points. “As the homogenous nation moves forward,” she writes, “it continues to spit out and pile up those who are no longer supported by a history that would establish them as subjects. They are, rather, expelled from the nation as so much debris, indiscernible from a littered landscape.” Quite apart from her indifference to those of Israel’s Arab neighbors who have far more homogenous societies than Israel, Butler’s meaning here presumably cannot include the claim that Israel would expel its own Arab citizens in the wake of a formal two state solution. Presumably what Butler means is not only that those who fled in 1948 continue to live as victims of expulsion, that the present time continues to reenact the past, but also that any Palestinian who doesn’t have free access to and choice of residence throughout Palestine lives in an intolerable condition of exile. Butler’s solution: “the undoing of Israeli colonial power and military force.” Setting aside her appalling tendency to forget that Israel includes millions of human beings, not just the mechanized colonialist entity she has constructed in her mind, one may say simply that Butler has crafted a recipe for war.

A certain studied indifference to Israel’s citizens also informs Butler’s last abstract claim. Following the standard (and explicit) BDS effort to delegitimize the Israeli state, she argues, as Elhanan Yakira points out in his own contribution to Rosenfeld’s Resurgent Antisemitism collection, “that Israel either never has been ‘legitimate’ or that it has lost its legitimacy by its allegedly criminal behavior.” What is odd about this argument, as Yakira elaborates, is that a nation’s legitimacy is first of all established and sustained as a pact between a government and its citizens, and the citizens of Israel overwhelmingly want the Jewish state to persevere. From Butler’s perspective, Israel’s legitimacy can only be established by the true citizens, the Palestinian descendants of those who once lived there, most of whom do not live there now. The numbers are such that Israeli Jews would have no say in their own country’s future. For Butler, Israel would merely be “changing the foundations of its legitimacy,” the latter concept being Butler’s contribution to the political logic of Mideast peace.

In reality, Butler’s and the BDS movement’s first goal is to maximize international hostility toward Israel, a project destined to harden positions, not move the peace process along. In the real world, moreover, contrary to Butler’s utopian fantasy, history offers no guarantees.

If what we actually seek is peace in the Middle East we need to accept the need for Palestinian rights to self-determination within agreed-upon borders, to fair compensation to families displaced in 1948 or 1967, and to secure borders for a Jewish state. We can then work back from that goal to see what steps are most likely to lead there. As Kenneth Walzer observed in his May 2010 “Arguing With Judith Butler,” distributed in [Scholars for Peace in the Middle East’s Faculty Forum](#) “She says nothing about how we

might get from here to there.” What vague hints she offers, as in “Jews and the Bi-National Vision,” where she invokes a future “decided through radically democratic means by all the inhabitants of these lands,” is once again not reassuring. What will not help move us from here to any there is a BDS-inspired effort to demonize and delegitimize the State of Israel. If Butler is the best BDS can offer in the way of a rational case for their cause, and her work is fundamentally flawed by its unmitigated hostility toward Israel, American academics instead might begin their own education by reading what Israeli historians and journalists have to say about their own country, a country and situation they know and understand. It is a country whose politics cannot be reduced to simple platitudes within an ahistorical frame. Educated Americans should encourage respect for all parties, enhanced empathy among those who lack it, and come to the recognition that no one can win everything in Palestine.

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