

BOOK EVENT: MY RESPONSE

There is no greater gift for a scholar than having colleagues, students, or friends genuinely engage in one's work. The event in honor of my book *German Jewish Thought and its Afterlife*, organized by Ilana at the Hebrew University on 11 June was such a gift. Her friendship and kindness that made this moment possible mean more to me than I can say. After listening to the thoughtful reflections on my book on this occasion, I expressed my deep gratitude to her, to Aleida, Steve and Moshe. In retrospect, I would like to give further expression to this gratitude in an actual reply. It is, even now, impossible to address the full richness of the speakers' responses. I will therefore, in each case, focus on a few elements in these responses that particularly enriched my own understanding of what is at stake in my book.

Among the many insights I gained is the specific role literature plays in the book. I am, of course, aware that literature is fundamental to my arguments and in my thinking altogether, but I understand its function in this particular context more fully thanks to these responses.

To Ilana: In your generous introductory talk you emphasize the literary dimension of my book. This aspect is indeed central in the section you refer to in your response, a chapter dealing with various readings of the relationship between Kafka and Job. You highlight and discuss my attempt to imagine Kafka's Job on the basis of Kafka's short "counter-parable" on Abraham and the Akeda, the binding of Isaac. Ilana, in your succinct and illuminating rendering of this passage, you reveal a crucial theme that underlies the book's approach to both literature and the Jewish tradition: the care and concern for everyday life over metaphysical speculation. Your comments on this passage in my book enable me to clarify what is at stake in Kafka's imaginary "other Abraham" and in my own attempt to imagine Job as Kafka would have imagined him. In this passage I point to Kafka's refusal to glorify suffering as a sign of election, particularly the kind of representative suffering by one who has taken the misery of all upon himself to save mankind (as Margarete Susman's Christological reading of Kafka as Job would have it). Kafka's Abraham and, as I suggest, Kafka's Job refuse the very terms of the sacrifice that Abraham is

called to make in order to prove his blind obedience to God. My favorite sentence in Kafka's Abraham-text describes the attitude of such alternative Abrahams who are disconcerted that they are being summoned to the mountain while they are taking care of their *Bauplatz*, their "building site." These Abrahams not only invoke the infinity of their task of attending to their house – the human world – because there is always "one more thing that remains to be done." Kafka goes further, speculating: "All we can do is suspect that these men *deliberately* are not finishing their houses . . . so as not to have to lift their eyes and see the mountain- [the site of the sacrifice] - that stands in the distance." The reason behind the deliberate deferment of "finishing the house" sheds light on Kafka's own mode of writing that infinitely postpones the end. Interestingly, Abraham does not *negate* the existence of the mountain, which is here associated with both divine revelation and sacrifice to God, but he chooses to *focus* on the immanence of his everyday tasks. For me this links my conception of the Talmud as a guide to organizing the everydayness of worldly existence with my view of Kafka's writings, and both with an alternative vision of political theology implied in this attitude. Ilana's emphasis on this passage made me realize the central role this idea plays in my book.

To Aleida: Your response to my book wonderfully combines a thorough contextualization with an attentiveness to the role literature plays in the book. I'm delighted that you addressed the opening and closing vignettes of my discussion of Agamben's readings of Kafka, which are indeed a primal locus of my book's argument about the entanglement of literature, revolutionary politics and theology. I would like to address two more marginal moments in your response: the tenuousness of the German-Jewish legacy invoked in the subtitle of my book and what you consider to be my response to the current resurgence of theories based on a blurring of distinctions. In your response, you subtly weave your own sense of both the value and precariousness of the German-Jewish tradition of thought. You implicitly reply to my emphasis on the challenges to this tradition coming from what I call the Pauline turn, and you point to the loss of interest in the German-Jewish legacy in another "location": contemporary Israel. You're absolutely right that, today, books by Yekkes are often dumped into containers in Rehavia. A small corrective on a more hopeful note: often, these books are left behind on park benches in Rechavia by heirs who cannot read German, and are picked up by others who can, sometimes a stray tourist or someone who simply wants to adorn his or her library with an

outlandish gothic font on the cover. There is also a more substantial cause for optimism: the impressive Israeli reception of German-Jewish thought, more particularly of the thinkers discussed in my book: publications, events and conferences on Scholem abound: there were no less than three presentations of new books on his life and work this spring in Jerusalem alone. Last year, a Walter Benjamin conference with nearly a hundred speakers took place in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, many of them Israelis addressing the current situation in the region from Benjaminian perspective; my own essay on Benjamin's reception in Israel written a few years ago points to the importance and fascinating variety of his readership in this country (I found a dozen Israeli artworks since 2000 that refer to Benjamin's Angel of History); Kafka is among the modernist authors most widely read in Israel and is taught, discussed, fictionalized, quoted and invoked in the most diverse frameworks; Hannah Arendt's work and books about her are published, debated and studied in a myriad of contexts. Translations of Paul Celan's poetry may not be bestsellers, but his work is studied and analyzed at conferences in Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem no less than in Berlin, Vienna or Paris. (There are publications called *Arendt in Jerusalem*, *Kafka in Israel*, *Celan in Jerusalem*, *Benjamin in Israel*, *Scholem and Jerusalem*...)

But there is a more important factor characterizing the presence of these authors in Israel: the complexity and urgency marking the Israeli reception of the German-Jewish legacy. It is manifest in recent discussions about the court case concerning Max Brod's *Nachlass* and the Kafka papers it contains. I recently witnessed a highly significant controversy between advocates of two adverse positions. A representative of one of these positions – a prominent Kafka scholar - accused the Israeli government of insufficiently valuing the German-Jewish legacy in refusing to fund the purchase of these papers for the National Library. I spoke about this to a friend and colleague who did not consider the material safeguarding of this legacy a priority. He argued that the manuscripts were irrelevant to what he called the "black men" in Israel – the Sephardic Jews, the Ultra-Orthodox, the Israeli Arabs, who have no stakes in purchasing these manuscripts. Using Benjamin's term of a concern for the "tradition of the oppressed," this friend expressed the opinion that the government's support for these groups would be a more genuine and significant enactment of the German-Jewish legacy. This controversy may be regarded as evidence that the German-Jewish legacy, though tenuous indeed,

is discussed here in ways that matter. My attempt to reconfigure through this example the terms of established oppositions brings me to my second point.

Aleida, you claim that my book, bucking recent trends celebrating the blurring of dichotomies, differences and borders, makes a plea to maintain distinctions. You say that for me, "differences matter," and that this applies also to my view of identities. You claim that my book insists on "knowing who you are and where you belong." You are touching here upon one of the key challenges I was – and still am - faced with, not only in my book, but in my life. Precisely here literature is – and has been in writing my book – the source I returned to continuously. It allows me *both* to uphold distinctions and retain a sense of permanent motion with respect to belonging. In support of this, I can refer to the wonderful – and infinitely complex note from Paul Celan's prolegomena to his Meridian speech, which I discuss at length in a chapter of my book. Allow me to read this note as its take on identity and belonging – and the role literature plays in it – are essential to my discussion.

Man kann Verjuden. Verjuden, das ist anderswerden. One can become a Jew, just as one can become a human being; one can Jewify, and, I would like to add, from experience: today most of all in German... One can become Jewish. Admittedly this is difficult and many a Jew has failed in it; that is precisely why I consider it commendable.... Becoming Jewish: it is becoming other ... Not because the poem speaks of irritation, but because it unshakably remains itself that the poem becomes irritation – that it becomes the Jew of literature – ... One can Jewify. This admittedly happens rarely, but sometimes it does happen.

These lines contain a radical destabilization of identity without, however turning to indistinction. In my book, I try to reconstruct Celan's use of literary means to square this circle. Aleida, I'm most grateful to you for pointing out the necessity to clarify this key issue. You made me realize the precariousness of this aspect of my book and of my own thinking – its tenuousness and, hopefully – to use your lovely wordplay - maybe also the tenaciousness required to continue thinking about these questions that I address in my book but that remain far from resolved.

To Steve: I apologize for having kept you from the Roland Garros *finale*. Allow me to disclose our conversation the morning after. I called to

congratulate you upon hearing that Nadal won “big time” and totally crushed his opponent. You refused my “hurray’s,” saying that you would have preferred a tougher path to Nadal’s victory, a more interesting fight. It thus seems that you value the process more than the result. This is, by the way, also what literature is all about. And, as I suggested before, in some ways also the mode of Talmudic thinking.

I truly appreciate the direct and open challenges you voice in your response and hope that one day we shall have the opportunity for an honest match to contest this at length. For now, I merely want to address briefly two points of your critique. You ask: Is it justified to speak in one breath, in one argument, about figures whose Jewishness is so different such as Arendt and Scholem? And you continue: How Jewish, how Judaic are Kafka and Benjamin? How deeply are they Jewish? One of the risks I took in my book is precisely this wager: 1) that the small direct references to Judaism in these figures’ writings as well as certain structures of thought echoing the Jewish tradition do matter and 2) that they come out more starkly in the context of a critique of the contemporary Pauline readings of these elements.

Steve, I think my argument can, indeed, be convincing only if I don’t think in terms of the *Jewishness* of these figures. My interest lies not in their individual or collective identity nor in their lives as Jews. Their *writings*, however, contain elements that stimulate me to *think* about central issues I raise in my book, specifically the *tension* between poles, which you praise. And you reveal an autobiographically inspired but for me only textually enacted duality transcending the divide between particularism and universalism, between European modernity and the Jewish tradition. The texture of my argument – revealing its origins in my literary frame of mind - focuses attention not on the Jewishness of authors but on (even seemingly minor) elements in their writings that cannot be detached from their textual appearance.

Steve, let me add that I was most intrigued by your description of my autobiographical situation, which you describe as my “deep attachment to modernism *and* to being Jewish in the modern world.” I greatly appreciate your emphasis on the tension, but allow me to contest the terms. May I sharpen the opposition you draw, which would otherwise be *your* autobiography rather than mine: it is, indeed, a deep attachment to modernism on the one hand and – on the other, yes, not only to *being Jewish* in modernity but to *Judaism*. Had you not challenged me, I might have found it difficult to say this out loud.

And, finally, to Moshe: The effect of your response is not unlike that of Steve's challenge, which I just described. Your presentation of Halakhic Judaism – not only in your response but also in your work as a whole, may have contributed to enabling me to affirm my attachment to this form of Judaism. I'm most grateful and deeply pleased that you call my book a significant "contribution to modern Jewish thought." Your description of my apologia in the form of a critique of contemporary supersessionism spells out in powerful terms a core feature of my book, which I might have been hesitant to state so starkly.

Your analysis of the two ways in which this supersessionism manifests itself in the contemporary thinkers I discuss is compelling and helps me clarify my own argument. Your response sharply and succinctly captures today's revival of this old trope of an anti-Judaic critique of legalism and particularism, which is now correlated with an anti-democratic anarchy and an odd metaphorical Judaization of this anti-Judaic stance. Your affirmative response is most gratifying for me; it came across to the audience as powerful and seductive. (I was amazed when I realized that among the listeners who were enthralled by your talk were some who couldn't be further from the ideas you professed.)

Moshe, I fully agree about the centrality to my book of my interpretation of Agamben's reading of Kafka's "Before the Law," according to which Agamben, in Pauline fashion, praises the final closing of the door to the law. I recognized much of my key argument in your illuminating exposition. Your last sentence, however, reminds us that "readers, too, are autobiographical" – and I realized that this warning is also the most subtle invitation to resist being swayed by such a "strong reader" of one's work. You are absolutely right that I oppose the new supersessionism, particularly its key tenet, the suspension of Jewish law, which is to be replaced by Christian love. Only retrospectively, I realized the slight but significant difference between your and my objection to this Pauline invective. You argue – and beautifully illustrate your point with a quotation from the Shema - that the divine gift of the law *is* not oppression or the origin of sin as Paul would have it, but love itself. This differs ever so slightly from my own attempt to show that it is the imbrication of Halacha and Aggadah, of law and literature that counters the Pauline accusation of an inhuman harshness exerted by Jewish law. As I point out in my book Benjamin's attraction to these Talmudic categories in his reflections on Kafka and more particularly in is

disagreement with Scholem's focus on "divine judgment" can be explained by the political potential Benjamin may have sensed in the Talmud's imbrication of legal and narrative modes. This emphasis stems from my own engagement with literature, but my argument would have been much weaker without the inspiration I received from *your* writings about the relation between Aggadah and Halacha (in your article on Forgiveness that I quote).

Not incidentally, it is by way of literature that I can reclaim my own stance. Literature indeed brought me here today, because it was my study of literature that introduced the tension between Judaism and modernity into my life in a nourishing and inspiring (rather than merely conflictuous) way. My final thanks thus go to all those *compagnons de route* – former teachers, colleagues, friends and (importantly) students (both in Antwerp and, thanks to the initiative of Richie Cohen and Steve Aschheim who, also in Jerusalem) – with whom I share my exploration of the workings of literature in the context of Judaism and philosophy. This is what enables me to dwell, to live and think in the space between European modernity and the Jewish tradition with the hope of contributing ever so slightly to keeping the afterlife of the German-Jewish legacy alive.