

OPINION PAPER (PARADIGM RESPONSE)

What I Have Learned

Daniel Boyarin

University of California Berkeley, California, USA
Email: boyarin@berkeley.edu

I will begin by thanking Professor Quayson and all of the contributors to this forum with the deepest of gratitude. I deem it a great privilege to have been engaged with in such depth and seriousness by such a group of superb interlocutors, all of whom seem nearly completely to have understood my project, even when more negatively reflecting on it. As a version of the Talmud would have said: it is far better to be understood by one's opponents than to be misread by one's supporters. Even those who have most highly appraised my thinking here have done so in ways that have taught me much and challenged me to match the precision of my thinking to theirs. So I welcome both the approbation and the reprobation. In this response—and following the guidance of Professor Quayson—I will not answer or comment point by point or even author by author but give a somewhat expanded account of what I am about that will show, I hope, the manner in which I concede some arguments to the opponents and understand myself better having read carefully the proponents of my views.

After literally decades of obsessive thought about “the Jewish question,” I seem to have gotten myself into an aporia, a dead end of thinking with no way out. One way of describing this impasse would be that two of my most ardent political commitments, full justice for Palestinians, on one hand, and, on the other, for a vibrant, creative Jewish national culture, seem directly to contradict each other with no way out. It would seem as if the only way to fulfill the latter dream is to support the existence of the State of Israel, but clearly the existence of the State of Israel makes the first dream impossible to fulfill. The forms, moreover, that this Jewish existence takes in the Jewish state have always been problematic—and seemingly must need to be problematic even when pursued with the best will. This best will, moreover, turns more and more sour almost by the day; it seems almost inevitably so. The nation-state is well on the way to a racist, fascist state. Given the choice between justice and “my culture,” “my nation,” I have no choice but to choose justice, but the loss would be unsupportable. There is too much that I love, value, treasure, and enjoy deeply to become indifferent to the fate of the Jewish people and its works and days. I have devoted

most of my life's work (not my career but my life's work) to Yiddishkayt (Jewishness) to lose that struggle now. This loss would be for me not only unsupportable but virtually unthinkable. I am a Jew devoted to that predication and what it entails. What is to be done? And the dilemma deepens further.

For some time, I have tried to show how the term *religion*, implying a "faith" and a sphere of life separated from kinship, politics, and economics, is inappropriate historically, particularly for the Jews, as well as for most folks in the world. "Judaism" as the name of a "faith" or "religion" is a new invention, a new usage, especially among Jews ourselves. "The Jews," then, is not the name of a religion, and the Jews, historically at any rate, are not a religion.¹ The alternative, "nation," is somewhat less problematic from a historical point of view, for although there is no native Jewish term for "religion," *dat* being a very recent development in that sense, the term *'am* goes back to the Bible, and while perhaps not perfectly translated by "nation," it comes pretty close, and so I will try to show in the following the Jews manifest many of the characteristics usually assigned to nations such as shared narratives of origins and trials and tribulations, shared practices (including but not limited to "cultic" practices), shared languages, and other cultural forms. But—and it is a serious but—one further consequence of the nation, as currently imagined, is that it is taken to imply, in addition to the factors just mentioned, shared territory and power over that territory, a territory just for "us" whoever us are; here we speak of Jews.

My insistence on the Jews as nation has elicited, quite understandably then, the question, sometimes hostile, less often friendly—"So you've become a Zionist?" This is because, as we shall yet see, the only two alternatives for Jews have been posed as a "religion" or a nation-state, but I endorse neither. It seems from current discourse that the only answer to the question of "if not a religion, then what is it?": a nation. Because, moreover, "we all know that a nation means a state," we seem to be right back at Ben Gurion National Airport, aghast at what we see. I have *not*, needless (or needful) to say, become a Zionist. Right now, in the here and now for reasons to be explored in some detail in the book, I argue, nonetheless, that it is a very bad idea for Jews to claim the status of "religion." I have decided I can no longer live with this as a dead end but must avoid the paved roads that both lead to perdition and find a way forward however rocky the road ahead.

We can't go on, but we must go on.

In the project of which this article is a sort of precis, I have attempted to begin to seek a way through the aporia. It is not intended as a finished doctrine, certainly not a dogma, but a stimulus to further thought, a balm to emotions, a fillip to action, and a gesture of more than one love. My interlocutors here seem to have gotten this part, including its unfinished—perhaps unfinishable—state and nature.

Let me now illustrate this last point, the unfinished and unfinishable nature of the project, namely the allegedly vital question usually posed as "Who is a Jew?" I am not in the business of making such determinations, nor do I need to be or

¹ Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion*, Key Words for Jewish Studies (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

want to be. For certain specific situations, the weight of tradition as interpreted by rabbinic authorities will make such determinations, such, perhaps, as what counts as a *Jewish* marriage or who gets called to read liturgically from the Torah. For nearly all other situations that I can think of, the question is not only not necessary but irrelevant. The juridical or dogmatic question is almost totally beside the point for this project here. What is absolutely excluded by my thought is the rightness of a state, a state nominally of all of its citizens, deciding who is a citizen and who not or who is a first-class citizen and who a second-class citizen on such a *national* basis. I will have more to say presently on this *mersesem* (Yiddish for *insha'Allah*).

A second example of a question that I cannot possibly answer or a problem that cannot be solved is the question of language for a future and ongoing diaspora (Jewish) nation; only time will tell. This is not something that will be determined by a language academy or anything even analogous. There's a longer discussion in the book than I can even summarize here. But suffice it to say that I have no answer as to whether it will end up being Judeo-English (Yinglish), Judeo-Hebrew (not Israeli), or something else as yet undreamed of. The point that I do see as significant is the way that Jewish languages enact the double location of Jews as at home with other Jews and as at home where they live. My own language is fluent English—I live in the United States—but when I speak to other Jews it is peppered, at least, maybe salted with talmud expressions, technical terms, proverbs that I heard from my grandmother in Yiddish, and grammatical and syntactical forms that make it sound/feel like Jewish speech (more detail on this in the book). But I can't possibly predict or seek to determine the future of Jewish language. Yiddish and Judezmo (Judeo-Spanish, sometimes referred to inaccurately as Ladino), Moghrabi (North African Jewish Arabic) as well as Hebrew (and some others), of course, are still living languages.

The most challenging question raised, the one on which (in my judgment) my imagined diasporic community rests, is the question of the relations of the concepts of nation and state. Again, I won't specify precisely where I find that question articulated in these interlocking responses but rather attempt to present some thoughts about how I respond to the inquiry posed, which, by the way, comes mostly from the direction of India. For India—and I hope that I am not misunderstanding—it seems that the state and the nation rose together as virtually one extended process. In other words, and I see no reason to doubt this account, the state played such a major role in the nation-building process, as so well described in Partha Chatterjee's *The Nation and Its Fragments*,² and clearly reiterated here that it is virtually impossible to distinguish nation from state. Italy is perhaps another good example as remarked as well by Chatterjee. Even more than the India case, he proposes that "In Italy, for instance, the Risorgimento produced the nation-state well before anything like a people-nation had been constructed." I am sure that he is correct in his historical accounts and that the forming of nations, as well as the forming of states, took many and "messy"

² Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

paths. Nonetheless, I persist in insisting that we would be better served analytically by distinguishing between the nation-state and the “people-nation” by reserving the term *state* for the former and *nation* for the latter, such that we could speak of various nations sharing the state—or not. The nation refers to the people, things they do, say, and share, as is its etymological wont. In the case of the Jews, I reckon, the nation—that is the people—had existed for centuries upon centuries before anyone got serious about having a state. The scope of the state is a territory; its functions are to provide aid and comfort for all of the people and peoples that inhabit it, including the needs of all the nations or nationalities within its borders. It is fairly easy, then, for me to imagine nations without states, viz the German *Kulturvolk* and my diaspora nation; the theoretical problem for me—as raised by several of these responses in different ways and forms—is where do states come from without nations? I am not going to attempt to answer that question here and now, but it is a good one and one on which I shall have to study for quite a while. One smallish caveat: I don’t see myself as a follower of Ahad Ha’am, although some of his ideas appeal to me greatly. I’m not sure if I want any *one* there for the Jews at all.

There are, indeed, many good questions in these papers, questions on which I will mull for days, weeks, and as many years as I have left to mull. I have avoided even attempting to pursue the detailed arguments and reflections and animadversions offered here (e.g., Cheyette’s reading of Fanon). My purpose in this work is to open up a new possibility for thought, a way of imagining a vibrant future for Jews that does not necessitate the zero-sum game that the Wilsonian nation-state seems always to produce but also one that does not wither the Jews away into the vapidness of becoming a variety of Protestantism or the emptiness of being thrilled to discover that present culture-hero Alexander Hamilton was really Jewish. A dilemma is the choice between two paths, neither of which is satisfactory; I will avoid the paths and strike out in the wilderness. I seek to imagine a third way, first for the Jews (as St. Paul would have said) and then for others to whom the same and related dilemmas appear.

“If I am for others, who will be for me? And if I am for myself, what good am I? And if not now, when?”

Apologies to those respondents to whom I have not given explicit attention; it is mostly because their questions are too deep, too searching, too probing for me to even attempt answers. Let the conversation continue!

Author biography. Daniel Boyarin is emeritus Taubman Professor of Talmudic Culture in the Departments of Near Eastern Studies and Rhetoric at UC Berkeley. He is for 2021–2022 the Grus Professor of Jewish Law at Harvard Law School. He has devoted his career to figuring out why there are Jews, and firmly convinced that this is a good thing, has devoted and continues to devote much of his thinking to how to make that good thing valuable for all that lives as well, not only Jews. (Email: boyarin@berkeley.edu)

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