This paper is a preliminary attempt at a diasporic critique of diasporism. Thus, at the outset, I must clarify both the object of my critique – namely, contemporary Jewish diasporism – and the sense in which my critique is itself diasporic.

In the decade since the Oslo accords, Jewish academics in Britain and the United States have increasingly invoked the concept of diaspora to counter a purported Jewish consensus regarding the justice and legitimacy of Zionism. At a moment when the Israeli occupation appears interminable, Jewish scholars on the academic left have begun to argue that a Jewish state is neither a viable, nor a just, enterprise – and they have increasingly looked to diaspora for alternatives to Zionist ideology. For these scholars, diaspora provides a Jewish location from which to criticize Israeli state policies, and, more importantly, to challenge the notion, which they impute to Zionism itself, that Judaism and Zionism are coextensive. The most prominent exponents of this stance, such as Judith Butler and Daniel Boyarin, advocate a one-state, or binational, solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unlike liberal Zionists, who critique the occupation in part because it imperils Israel’s status as a “Jewish and democratic” state,¹ binationalists deny that a “Jewish” state – which accords differential forms of citizenship to Jews and non-Jews – can be democratic. Rejecting theoretical, political, and halachic frameworks that produce nationalist exclusions, these scholars mine the diasporic heritage for models of Jewish identity that will facilitate “cohabitation” between Jews and non-Jews. These scholars not only share a political critique of the Israeli state, they also articulate this

1 Liberal Zionists include Peter Beinart and Gershom Gorenberg.
critique in a shared theoretical idiom – namely, poststructuralist accounts of identity and difference. Indeed, beyond its value as a location from which to challenge Israeli state violence, diaspora promises to yield compelling theoretical alternatives to hegemonic, Western models of territorial nationalism, or so these theorists contend. I call this strand within contemporary Jewish thought “diasporism” – and it provides the object of my critique in this paper. “Diasporism” is not my coinage – nor is it a label that Butler and Boyarin would necessarily apply to themselves. The term is useful, however, for heuristic purposes, capturing a strand within contemporary Jewish thought that makes reservations about Zionism the occasion for a more radical rethinking of Jewish history, identity, and politics.

“Diasporist” scholars have been subject to scathing, ad hominem attack from Zionist critics. To advocate for a binational state, Zionist critics contend, is to betray a pathological deficiency in “ahavat yisrael” – love of and fealty to the Jewish people. Thus, Allan Arkush dismisses Judith Butler’s Arendtian ethos of cohabitation as an “ill-informed, facile, and cold-hearted repudiation of the Jewish state.”

In Zionist polemics

2 The Boyarins do identify as diasporists. See Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, Powers of Diaspora, 44. Others who use the term include Phillip Roth (in Operation Shylock) and R.B. Kitaj.

3 In Israel, Elhanan Yakira has been the foremost opponent of diasporism.

4 See the Hannah Arendt/Gershom Scholem exchange.

5 Allan Arkush, “State and Counterstate,” Jewish Review of Books, no. 6 (summer 2011). By contrast, Arkush commends David N. Myers and Noam Pianko, whose books he reviews alongside those of Butler and Jacqueline Rose, as “learned historians and deeply committed Jews who write with their people’s best interests at heart.” Myers and Pianko pass muster as committed Jews, it seems, because, while they “call attention to some of” Israel’s “defects and drawbacks,” they do so “only with a view to making it a better place.” In Arkush’s idiom, “making Israel a better place” appears contingent upon maintaining its self-understanding as a Jewish state. The possibility that transforming Israel into a state of all its citizens would make it “a better place” is inconceivable to Arkush. Because Zionism remains the litmus test for Jewish loyalty, in Arkush’s view, advocates of a binational state can only be motivated by a toxic brew of “cold-heartedness,” “annoyance,” “post-modernism,” and “utopianism.” Admittedly, Arkush offers a more measured condemnation of contemporary diasporism in “From Diaspora Nationalism to Radical Diasporism,” Modern Judaism (2009) 29, 3: 326-350. In this essay, which targets the Boyarins, among others, Arkush argues that Simon Dubnow’s “diaspora-centered viewpoint” is “more sagacious than that of today’s diasporists” (327). Dubnow wins Arkush’s approval because, in his judgment, “there is no reason
like Arkush’s, a non-Zionist political stance discredits its proponents’ theoretical claims, placing them beyond the pale of scholarly, let alone Jewish, consideration. To turn Arkush’s dismissal of Butler back against him – polemics like Arkush’s are “too malevolent and ill-informed to merit serious consideration.” Indeed, they only confirm Butler’s complaint that “the threat of being called ‘anti-semitic’” (or, in this instance, “cold-hearted”) “seeks to control, at the level of the subject, what one is willing to say out loud and, at the level of society in general, to circumscribe what can and cannot be permissibly spoken out loud in the public sphere.” That, thus far, Zionist polemic is the only critique that diasporism has elicited provides further evidence – as if further evidence were needed – of the ideological conformity and intellectual poverty of Jewish public discourse.

I call this project a “diasporic critique of diasporism,” then, because the standpoint from which I engage contemporary diasporism is not Zionist. The paper’s goal is neither to discredit, nor to rebut, the political conclusions that diasporists have reached to doubt that Dubnow would have given the State of Israel his blessings, had he lived long enough to see it” (343). Indeed, had Dubnow lived, “it seems most likely that he would have become something very hard to distinguish from a Zionist” (338). At the same time, Arkush speculates that, were he alive today, Dubnow might advocate “the replacement of Israel and the Palestinian authority with a bi-national state” (344). In the Boyarins’ case, endorsing bi-nationalism is tantamount to “eagerly delegitimizing Israel,” while, in the case of Arkush’s imagined Dubnow, the same endorsement is somehow consistent with an embrace of the state of Israel (344). Arkush appears to believe that the Boyarins have called for Israel’s “dissolution.” By contrast, his time-traveling Dubnow would not have regarded Israel’s discriminatory practices against Arabs “as evidence of the state of Israel’s unacceptable character and the consequent need to replace it with something other than a Jewish state” (338). Again, it is unclear why Dubnow’s ostensible endorsement of a binational state does not herald the end of the Jewish state, while the Boyarins’ does. For an exchange between Arkush and Boyarin, see “Antiheroic Mock Heroics: Daniel Boyarin versus Theodor Herzl and His Legacy,” Jewish Social Studies 4, 3 (Spring-Summer 1998): 65-92 and Daniel Boyarin, “Response to Allan Arkush,” Jewish Social Studies 4, 3 (Spring-Summer 1998): 93-95. I do not deny the possibility of a sophisticated Zionist rejoinder to contemporary diasporism. A sophisticated Zionist response would offer a theoretical-political defense of the necessity, at the current juncture, of a Jewish state, and of a commensurate theoretical framework. It is unfortunate that Zionists have met diasporism with polemic and ad hominem attack, rather than a theoretical-political defense of a Jewish state. For sophisticated philosophical defenses of Zionism that do no address diasporism, see the work of Chaim Gans and Yael Tamir.

6 Judith Butler, Precarious Life, 127.
regarding a just resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unlike Zionists, liberal or otherwise, I have no principled objections to the transformation of Israel into a binational state. Indeed, with post-Zionists and diasporists, I believe that Israel cannot be both “Jewish and democratic.” (Or, Israel can only be “Jewish and democratic” if all citizens, both Jewish and non-Jewish, have equal say in defining the meaning of the term “Jewish” for the purposes of the basic law.) Moreover, to adopt a confessional tone, the author of this paper is an American Jew who very much “likes” living in diaspora. In sum, my concern is not that diasporists renounce Zionism. Rather, it is that contemporary diasporism fails to offer a compelling vision for diasporic politics.

Contemporary diasporism fails to offer a compelling vision for diasporic politics, I argue, because it conflates diasporic politics with identity politics. Diaspora proves appealing to contemporary scholars as a condition that fosters a Jewish identity resistant to essentialist and exclusionary logics. For Butler, diaspora is “a mode of living in which alterity is constitutive of who one is.” For the Boyarins, “diasporic identity is a disaggregated identity. Jewishness disrupts the very categories of identity because it is

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7 In practice, however, I support “liberal Zionist” efforts to achieve a two-state solution in Israel/Palestine. I continue to support a two-state solution because it is what the vast majority of Israelis and Palestinians prefer, and, as such, it retains democratic legitimacy – and an air of pragmatic viability (however remote). If political intransigence and settlement growth continue, however, a two-state solution will no longer be viable in practice. Absent a radical (and unforeseen) breakthrough in the peace process, at some point in the near future, the only just solution will be the adoption of some form of binationalism.

8 See Phillip Roth, *The Counterlife*: “‘Why do Jews persist living in the Diaspora?’ I didn’t want to write off with one line a man obviously in a state of serious confusion, but I didn’t want this conversation either…. The best I could try to do was to leave him with something to think about. ‘Because they like it,’ I replied and got up and moved to an empty seat a few rows back.”

9 For diasporism’s relationship to debates in identity politics and postcolonial theory, see Brett Ashley Kaplan, “Contested, constructed home(lands): Diaspora, postcolonial studies and Zionism,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies, 6:1*, 87: Texts such as Butler’s and Boyarin’s “contribute to an emerging re-evaluation of how contested home and homelands can nonetheless construct usable senses of identity and place. These texts can be seen as part of a larger movement beyond the postmodern moment when the in-between, the border, the flux, the non-place were valued over ‘the there’ (in Gertrude Stein’s phrase), site, stability, and place.” See also Michael Galchinsky, “Scattered Seeds: A Dialogue of Diasporas,” in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism* and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*.

For these theorists, diaspora rehabilitates particularistic attachments, because it attests the possibility of an identity purged “of its elements of domination and oppression,” an identity constituted by orientation toward the other.\(^\text{11}\) With the suggestion that questions of identity and difference are the primary questions posed by, and in, Jewish diaspora, contemporary diasporists depart from one strand of traditional Jewish thinking about \textit{galut}. Surveying the myriad ways that Jewish thinkers have understood, justified, and lamented exile is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper.\(^\text{12}\) Rather, I will (briefly) invoke one traditional understanding of diaspora, to highlight facets of diasporic politics occluded by the diasporists’ preoccupation with identity.

For most of Jewish history, diaspora has been defined in terms of sovereignty, and the theoretical, political, and halachic questions it posed were questions of human and national sovereignty – not questions of identity. The question of human sovereignty is a question about the legitimacy, and extent, of human political agency in a tradition that affirms divine sovereignty. On one influential understanding of diaspora, articulated in the midrash known as “the three oaths,” exile consigns Jews to political passivity.\(^\text{13}\)


\(^{12}\) Boyarins, “Diaspora: Generation,” 710.

\(^{13}\) See Yitzhak F. Baer, \textit{Galut}, Schocken Books, New York, 1947, 9: “The word ‘Galut’ embraces a whole world of facts and ideas that have appeared with varying strength and clarity in every age of Jewish history. Political servitude and dispersion, the longing for liberation and reunion, sin and repentance and atonement: these are the larger elements that must go to make up the concept of Galut if the word is to retain any real meaning.” \textit{Galut} is an expressly Zionist book, which vehemently denies that Jews have a future in Europe. Yet Baer’s Zionist commitments afford him an insight that escapes contemporary diasporists, and which I seek to recuperate for non-Zionist projects – namely, the insight that one of galut’s primary meanings is “political servitude” (118).

\(^{14}\) BT Ketubot 111a, trans. Daiches and Slotki, Soncino Press: “One, that Israel shall not go up [all together as if surrounded] by a wall; the second, that whereby the Holy One, blessed be He, adjured Israel that they shall not rebel against the nations of the world; and the third is that whereby the Holy One, blessed be He, adjured the idolaters that they shall not oppress Israel too much.”
this midrash, a prohibition on projects to reverse the Jews’ divinely ordained dispersion bespeaks deeper anxiety about the legitimacy of human agency as such. The question of national sovereignty is a question about the respective merits of subjection to foreign rulers and political self-determination. The rabbinic dictum, cited by Maimonides, that “the sole difference between the present and the Messianic days is delivery from servitude to foreign powers,” attests the centrality of national sovereignty to traditional conceptions of exile and redemption. On this view, lack of self-determination defines exile, and its restoration defines redemption. I invoke these texts at the outset not to endorse the midrash’s or Maimonides’ respective definitions of exile. Rather, I invoke these texts to highlight one way that the question of diaspora has been framed in Jewish texts – namely, as a political question about human agency, human power, and Jewish self-rule.

In their preoccupation with questions of identity and difference, contemporary diasporists have forgotten these distinctively political questions. I highlight contemporary diasporists’ relative neglect of traditional questions of sovereignty not to brand their thought treyf. Rather, I invoke the question of sovereignty in an effort to reframe diasporic projects in emphatically political terms. With the turn to identity, I argue, diasporism abandons a political conception of Jewish peoplehood. Relegating the project of defining Jewish collectivity in political terms to Zionism, diasporists turn Jewishness into an individual ethical stance (Butler), or they ground Jewish solidarity in the non-political fact of genealogical descent (Boyarin). Too often, diasporists assume that renouncing a politics centered on the Land, or on the model of the nation-state, requires

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recasting Jewish “identity” in non-political terms. Although the Boyarins’ investment in Jewish difference stems in part from its ostensible resistance to the Pauline denigration of carnality, the diasporists’ fixation on identity risks enshrining a “Protestant” notion of Judaism as a personal or private faith. More importantly, diasporist celebrations of “Jewishness” as a non-identitarian identity divert theoretical and political attention away from the more pressing questions of Jewish power and Jewish self-rule. The real challenge for diasporic politics is to envision Jewish collectivity, and Jewish self-rule, in non-Zionist terms. To retain a political conception of Jewish solidarity that resists the Zionist negation of the exile requires confronting anti-political tendencies within traditional Jewish thought, tendencies that contemporary diasporists perpetuate.

In what follows, I examine the different ways that, by locating the promise of diaspora in a Jewish identity oriented toward the other, Butler and the Boyarins evade, ignore, or foreclose questions of sovereignty (both human and political).

I. Judith Butler

Since 9/11, Judith Butler has written a series of essays attacking the United States government’s exploitation of feelings of grief and vulnerability to justify the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Butler’s abiding theoretical concern, in these essays, is the constitution of the public sphere. “The limits of the sayable, the limits of what can appear, circumscribe the domain in which political speech operates and certain kinds of subjects appear as viable actors.” In this context, Butler has increasingly sought to expose and challenge the constraints that shape American Jewish public discourse. In “The Charge of Anti-Semitism: Jews, Israel, and the Risks of Public Critique” and “Is Judaism

16 Butler, Precarious, xvii.
Zionism?,” Butler laments the narrow range of political positions legible as “Jewish” in America today. On one level, Butler’s point in these essays is quite straightforward: she reminds readers that not all Jews support the state of Israel, and insists that public criticism of Israel is not grounds for expulsion from the Jewish community, or for charges of self-hatred. Yet Butler weds this plea for recognition of Jewish ideological diversity to a more consequential, and, I would argue, more controversial, theoretical claim about the dynamics of Jewish identity – which claim animates her vision of diasporic politics. To adopt an admittedly provocative formulation: Butler upholds an idiosyncratic notion of election in which diaspora enables Jews to apprehend, and affirm, the philosophical dynamics of identity as such. Properly understood, Jewish identity has the distinction of being an identity that resists identitarian closure. To celebrate Jewishness as “an anti-identitarian project,” however, is to spurn the notion that what distinguishes Jewish religiosity is its national or political dimension.17 For Butler, “Jewishness” is an ethical stance before the other, rather than a source of political membership. Those who share Butler’s conviction that Judaism does not entail Zionism should nevertheless be wary of framing diasporic politics in Butler’s terms, for this framing reinforces the modern reduction of Judaism to an individual faith.18

That Butler casts the debate in which she intervenes as one about the meaning of “Jewishness” reflects her departure from political conceptions of Jewish collectivity.19 The title of her essay (“Is Judaism Zionism?”) notwithstanding, Butler generally speaks of “Jewishness,” rather than Judaism. Butler’s preoccupation with “Jewishness,” as

18 Butler’s essays are the first fruits of a larger book project, still in progress, on the Jewish critique of violence. My remarks here will necessarily be preliminary, given that Butler has yet to publish her definitive theoretical statement on these matters.
19 See Butler, Precarious, 112.
opposed to Judaism, could signify her indifference to and abstention from halachic debates. For our purposes, however, Butler’s preference for the term “Jewishness” proves significant as evidence of a disinclination to contest the modern conversion of “a national quality into a private affair.” As Butler knows, Hannah Arendt traces the Jews’ increasing failure to understand the Jewish question in political terms to the nineteenth-century emergence of “Jewishness.” On Arendt’s narrative, in modern Europe, “instead of being defined by nationality or religion, Jews were being transformed into a social group whose members shared certain psychological attributes and reactions, the sum total of which was supposed to constitute ‘Jewishness.’” Clearly, by “Jewishness,” Butler does not intend a uniform set of psychological traits – neurosis, say – that all Jews exhibit. Indeed, Butler insists on the myriad expressions that Jewishness finds, against Zionists who assume that “psychologically and sociologically, every Jew has such an identification [with the state of Israel], and that this identification is essential to Jewish identity.”

The argument that all Jews have a heartfelt investment in the state of Israel is simply untrue. Some have a heartfelt investment in corned beef sandwiches or in certain Talmudic tales, memories of their grandmother, the taste of borscht or the echoes of Yiddish theatre. Some care most about Hebrew songs or religious liturgy and rituals. Some have an investment in historical and cultural archives from Eastern Europe or from the Shoah, or in forms of labor activism that are thoroughly secular, though ‘Jewish’ in a substantively social sense. There are sources of American Jewish identification, for instance, in food, in religious ritual, in social service organizations, in diasporic communities, in civil rights and

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21 Arendt, *Origins*, 66. See also 67, 83, 87. For Butler on Arendt and “Jewishness,” see “Judaism,” 73: “As Hannah Arendt made clear in her early writings, Jewishness is not always the same as Judaism. And, as she made clear in her evolving political position on the state of Israel, neither Judaism nor Jewishness necessarily leads to the embrace of Zionism.” Significantly, Butler is more impressed by Arendt’s dissent from Zionism than by her insight that the modern transformation of the Jews from a religious or political group into a social group both inspired new forms of anti-semitism, and hampered the Jews’ ability to confront this anti-semitism.
social justice struggles that may exist in relative independence from the status of Israel.²³

Yet Butler’s rejoinder – which, as an empirical matter, is undoubtedly true – does not contest the (social and psychological) terms in which her Zionist antagonist has ostensibly framed the debate. Like the Zionist who assumes that, as an empirical matter, all Jews identify, psychologically and socially, with the state of Israel, Butler understands “Jewishness” as a function of social identification – independent of express Jewish content, labor activism is Jewish in “a substantively social sense” – and affective investment. With a sentimentality that verges on kitsch, Butler locates the ties that bind Jews primarily, but not exclusively, in a private, domestic sphere (corned beef, borscht, Bubbie). Granted, Butler also celebrates progressive political activism as a vital expression of “Jewishness.” Once recast as “a source of American Jewish identification,” however, a propensity to social activism is just a psychological or social trait that some Jews happen to share. Thus, to say that “Jewishness” finds diverse expression, as Butler does, is not to say that it expresses political consciousness, in the Arendtian sense. When Butler’s activists speak as Jews in the public sphere, they may be motivated by warm memories, sentimental attachments, or commitments to social justice – but they do not speak as members of a Jewish collectivity defined in political terms.²⁴

²³ Butler, Precarious, 113.

²⁴ Significantly, Butler professes anguish when Israeli state violence demands a critical response. Recalling an “Open Letter from American Jews” that she signed, Butler writes: “Let us assume that a vast number of those who signed that petition undergo something we might reasonably term heartache when taking a stand against Israeli policy in public, and that hands shook as they entered their names on the list” (PL 114). Again, as an empirical matter, Butler is undoubtedly correct that Israel’s actions inspire heartache in many leftist Jews. By taking said heartache as evidence of sincere Jewish identification, which identification attests the Jewish bona fides of the signatories, however, Butler grounds activism in the realm of sentimental attachment. See Arendt, Origins, 84: “The result was that their private lives, their decisions and sentiments, became the very center of their ‘Jewishness.’” In “Judaism,” Butler asserts that “to openly and publicly criticize such violence is in some ways an obligatory ethical demand from within Jewish frameworks,” but the obligation is ethical, rather than political (73).
For Butler, the transformation of Judaism into Jewishness is a historical and theoretical fait accompli. More importantly, this transformation is not without normative dividends, precisely because it enables the “pluralization” of Jewish life.25 Significantly, “diaspora” is the name Butler gives to the polyvalence of Jewishness. Against Zionists and anti-semites who reduce “Jewishness to Israeli interests,” Butler asserts, “The ‘Jew’ is no more defined by Israel than by anti-Semitic diatribe. The ‘Jew’ exceeds both determinations, and is to be found, substantively, as this diasporic excess, a historically and culturally changing identity that takes no single form and has no single telos.”26

Clearly, “diaspora” does not mean geographic dispersion, lack of political sovereignty, or political passivity.27 What is the ideological and theoretical force of invoking diaspora in this context? On one level, Butler makes the historicist point that, like all other religions, Judaism is a historical product and, as such, varies with time and place. To assert otherwise, as Butler’s Zionist antagonists purportedly do, is unhistorical. On another level, however, Butler invokes diaspora to define “the Jew” as that which resists definition. Here, “diaspora” names the ability of Jewish identity to exceed its own terms, to escape any and every attempt to specify its essence. A “diasporic version of Jewishness” involves “a mode of living in which alterity is constitutive of who one is.”28

Thus, the adjective “diasporic” captures a philosophical insight about dynamics of

26 Butler, Precarious, 126.
27 Indeed, Butler describes Israeli-Palestinian groups, such as Ta’ayush and Neve Shalom, as “diasporic elements working within Israel itself to dislodge the pervasive assumption of nationalism” (119). As an empirical matter, it is unclear why undertaking projects of Jewish-Arab collaboration entails resistance to or refusal of nationalism. Liberal Zionists can and do participate in demonstrations at Sheikh Jarrah, for instance. I mention this empirical fact only because it helps to highlight aspects of Butler’s theoretical framework. If Butler would consider liberal Zionists who protest with Palestinians at Sheikh Jarrah “diasporic elements,” then, in her lexicon, the adjective “diasporic” does not mean a refusal of nationalism as such. Rather, it appears to describe an ethos of resistance to unjust, discriminatory policies carried out in the name of (and, liberal Zionists would add, as a perversion of) nationalism.
identity and difference, which insight, Butler proceeds to argue, inspires a distinctive ethical stance, that of cohabitation.

On Butler’s interpretation, Zionist violence attests a mistaken investment in an integral and invariant Jewish identity – which investment, she implies, entails violent refusal to “cohabit,” to share the land with others. To resist the “ongoing and violent project of settler colonialism that constitutes political Zionism,” Butler exhorts readers to “remember what Jewish means.”

In the lexicon of Butler’s non-Zionist thinkers, such as Arendt, Rosenzweig, and Benjamin, “Jewish” means a paradoxical identity that simultaneously resists closure and inspires an ethical sensibility toward the other. “Within certain ethical frameworks, Jewishness is itself an anti-identitarian project insofar as we might even say that being a Jew implies taking us an ethical relation to the non-Jew.”

To deny that there is such a thing as a Jewish essence is, on Butler’s argument, to allow that otherness is constitutive of Jewish identity. Moreover, sensitivity to dynamics of dispossession and dislocation that define Jewishness opens diasporic Jews to an ethical relation of cohabitation. Regarding “the problem of Jewishness,” Butler writes,

> It may be that the sense of belonging to that group entails taking up a relation to the non-Jew and that this mode of approaching the problem of alterity is fundamental to what it is to “belong” to Jewishness itself. In other words, to belong is to undergo a dispossession from the category, as paradoxical as that might seem.

Here, Butler rehabilitates Jewishness by casting it as an ethical sensibility that affirms the fundamental human facts of plurality and mutual dependence. Of course, Jewish identity is not the only identity constituted by alterity. All identities partake of dynamics of dispossession and dislocation, but they do not always acknowledge as much. Butler

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29 Butler, “Judaism,” 89.
31 Butler, “Judaism,” 86.
retains an idiosyncratic notion of election, then, because she contends that diaspora positions Jewish thinkers to discern dynamics of identity and difference.

For Butler, the pressing task is “to affirm the displacement of identity that Jewishness is, as paradoxical as that may sound.” 32 In sum, the question to which Butler responds is, “what does it mean to be Jewish?” In diaspora, Butler finds an answer that is in many respects appealing: Jewishness is a “safe” form of particularity, an identity constituted in relation to alterity, and thus open to cohabitation with the other. This answer is appealing, both because it credits Jews with precocious insight into philosophical dynamics of identity and difference, and because it promises to inspire an ethic of non-violence. Moreover, as a rejoinder to Larry Summers and others who would tar Jewish critics of Israel with the brush of inauthenticity or “self-hatred,” it may have force. As a political-theoretical rejoinder to more sophisticated forms of Zionism, however, the answer proves wanting, precisely because it responds to the wrong question. When Butler frames the diasporic question in terms of identity – what does “Jewish” mean? – she evades (or ignores) the question of sovereignty – what is the political situation of the Jews in modernity? As an empirical matter, it may be the case that, for most contemporary Jews, “the Jewish question” is a question of what “Jewishness” means, rather than a question about the terms of Jewish political enfranchisement in modernity. This empirical fact is cause for celebration, because it reflects the real achievements of Jewish emancipation. On a theoretical level, however, this fact provides cause for concern, because it forecloses the possibility of a vital debate about the meaning of and prospects for Jewish sovereignty. If diasporic political thought is to offer

a compelling alternative to Zionism, it must address the kinds of vulnerability to which Jews have been subject in diaspora such that sovereignty, understood in Zionist terms, remains a compelling aspiration for many. In other words, diasporic theorists must engage Zionism directly on the terrain of (human and national) sovereignty, either discrediting the aspiration to sovereignty as such, or demonstrating that Zionism does not exhaust contemporary possibilities for Jewish self-rule.

II. Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin

Like Butler, the Boyarins would resist Zionism by undertaking a project of identity construction. In “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity,” the Boyarins strive to “articulate a theory and practice of identity that would simultaneously respect the irreducibility and the positive value of cultural differences, address the harmfulness, not of abolishing frontiers but of dissolution of uniqueness, and encourage the mutual fructification of different life-styles and traditions.” Like Butler, the Boyarins find a non-oppressive, non-dominating Jewish identity in diaspora. “We will suggest that a Jewish subject position founded on generational connection and its attendant anamnestic responsibilities and pleasures affords the possibility of a flexible and nonhermetic critical Jewish identity.” If Butler risks making Jewishness an individual ethical stance, the Boyarins remain invested in Jewish community. Genealogy provides the resource that enables the Boyarins to hold onto the communal identity they so cherish, without falling prey to the urge to dominate. Shifting the ground of Jewish collective identity from “autochthony” – “one of the most potent and dangerous myths” –

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to genealogy will end violence and foster cohabitation, or so the Boyarins promise.\textsuperscript{35} On this account, genealogical identity is the only “safe” form of ethnocentrism, sustaining cultural difference without provoking violence.\textsuperscript{36} In the Boyarins’ text, the rhetoric of identity construction, and the antithesis between territorial and genealogical identity, elide the radically anti-political assumptions on which their argument rests. If Butler ignores questions of sovereignty, the Boyarins evade them, using the idioms of identity politics to obscure the deep suspicion of human power at the heart of their opposition to Zionism. Upon close inspection, denial of human sovereignty – rather than an insight regarding identity and difference – is what drives this justification for exile.

For the Boyarins, there are two ways that group identity has traditionally been constructed. “It has been figured on the one hand as the product of a common genealogical origin and, on the other, as produced by a common geographical origin.”\textsuperscript{37} (The possibility of founding “identity” on politics is apparently inconceivable, or untraditional.) On the Boyarins’ interpretation, Zionism founds Jewish identity on territory, while rabbinic Judaism – which they conflate with Judaism as such\textsuperscript{38} – founds Jewish identity on genealogy. One stated impetus for the essay is exculpating the rabbis on charges of racism; properly understood, genealogical identity resists, rather than

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\textsuperscript{35} Boyarins, “Diaspora,” 699.
\textsuperscript{36} The essay contains numerous tendentious and highly dubious historical claims, foremost among them the claim that “the most violent practice that rabbinic Judaism ever developed vis-à-vis its Others was spitting on the floor in the synagogue or walking around the block to avoid passing a pagan or Christian place of worship.” For a decisive refutation of the claim that diaspora Jews were innocent of anti-Christian violence, see Elliot Horowitz, \textit{Reckless Rites}.
\textsuperscript{37} Boyarins, “Diaspora,” 693.
\textsuperscript{38} For the conflation of rabbinitics with Judaism, see 712: “The solution of Zionism – that is, Jewish state hegemony, except insofar as it represented an emergency and temporary rescue operation – seems to us the subversion of Jewish culture and not its culmination. It represents the substitution of a European, Western cultural-political formation for a traditional Jewish one that has been based on a sharing, at best, of political power with others and that takes on entirely other meanings when combined with political hegemony.”
\end{flushleft}
fosters, “tribal warfare or fascism.”  

Significantly, the Boyarins’ chosen strategy for rehabilitating rabbinic ethnocentrism casts the Jews as a family, rather than a nation or a polity. In the Boyarins’ lexicon, genealogy signifies “bodily connection and embodied practice,” which practices have “significant critical power vis-à-vis the isolating and disemboding direction of Western idealist philosophies.” But genealogy also signifies “the claims of physical kinship,” “family, history, memory, and practice.” When the Boyarins embrace genealogical connection as an alternative to territorialism, they locate Jewish “identity” within the private, domestic sphere. With this privatizing turn, the Boyarins (unwittingly?) accept a “Western, imperialist” secularism that separates religion from politics, and locates the former in the private sphere. This privatizing turn is especially curious coming from professed dissenters from Pauline universalism. On one level, the celebration of genealogical attachment contests “the Platonic value system Europe has largely inherited from Paul,” for it rehabilitates the embodied and the particular. At the same time, locating Judaism within the private, domestic sphere risks enshrining a modern, Protestant notion of religion’s place within society (even though it resists the Protestant elevation of belief over practice). This renunciation of Judaism’s national and political dimension arguably derives from Reform, rather than rabbinic, Judaism.

Given that fundamental antithesis on which the Boyarins’ argument turns – territorial vs. genealogical identity – removes Jews from the political realm, it is not

39 Boyarins, “Diaspora,” 706. See also 720.
40 Although see the reference to a diasporic polity in Powers of Diaspora, 18.
altogether surprising that their opposition to Zionism partakes of anti-political animus.

Throughout the essay, however, the antithesis serves to obscure the nature and depth of the Boyarins’ aversion to politics. For the Boyarins, “the lesson of Diaspora” is that “peoples and lands are not organically connected.” Note that, on its face, the diasporic lesson surrounds a people’s spatial orientation – not their political posture. In theory, denying an organic connection between land and people could open the door to a distinctively political conception of peoplehood – in which obligation derives from consent, say, rather than geography. Yet the Boyarins tacitly deny this possibility when they identify the rabbis and, more importantly, the Neturei Karta, as the prime exponents of diaspora’s anti-territorial wisdom. Without denying the centrality of the land to rabbinic visions of redemption, the Boyarins nevertheless credit the rabbis with renouncing the land. “The point is not that the Land was devalued by the Rabbis but that they renounced it until the final redemption.” With the rabbis, the Neturei Karta understand that “redemption through Land must either be infinitely deferred…or become a moral monster.”

As the reference to the Neturei Karta reveals, what presents as an admonition against territorialism is in fact an admonition against politics as such. The Neturei Karta stance is not adequately described as a renunciation of the land. Indeed, many anti-Zionist haredim live on the land, precisely because they can fulfill more mitzvot within the land’s confines. It would be more accurate to say that Neturei Karta

45 Boyarins, “Diaspora,” 723. See also Boyarins, Powers, 10: “Diaspora offers an alternative ‘ground’ to that of the territorial state for the intricate and always contentious linkage between cultural identity and political organization. Such an alternative ground could avoid the necessarily violent ways in which states resist their own inevitable impermanence. It could also ameliorate the insistence on purity that derives from the dominant, static conception of legitimate collective identity. This alternative ground could also afford greater cultural-political ‘time-space’ for the continued existence of established diasporic communities and for the inevitable emergence and elaboration of new diasporas in the transnational cultural and economic sphere. That, at any rate, is the most general notion of the powers of diaspora that we want to propose.”
opposition to Zionism derives from renunciation of human agency. Thus, Satmar theodicy understands the holocaust as punishment for the Zionist sin of “forcing the end.” By casting diaspora as a choice for genealogy, and against the land, the Boyarins elide the theology of Jewish political passivity to which their theoretical antecedents subscribe. Presumably, they elide this theology because it would alienate their intended audience of right-thinking academic leftists. Yet their elision both reflects, and sustains, a deeper theoretical mistake. The Boyarins endorse diaspora “as an alternative to the model of self-determination, which is, after all, in itself a Western, imperialist imposition on the rest of the world.”48 Again, to renounce the land, as diasporic traditions ostensibly counsel, is not to renounce self-determination. Fanatical territorialism does not exhaust the possibilities for self-determination, understood in political terms. Renunciation of the land only entails retreat from politics into genealogy if “the land” is a metonym for human agency.

Despite the Boyarins’ stated agenda of the identity construction, then, what diaspora really models is the “choice” to renounce power and agency.49 Identity politics proves a fashionable diversion from the real issue at stake – namely, the traditional question of (human and national) sovereignty. The Boyarins acknowledge as much when they assert, “something else was needed for the potential negative implications” of Jewish culture “to become actualized. That necessity is power over others. Particularism plus power yields tribal warfare or fascism.”50 In this passage, Jewish violence results not, as Butler and the Boyarins themselves suggest, from retrograde notions of integral,
essential identity.\textsuperscript{51} Indeed, these notions are “safe” as long as those who identify as such remain enslaved. Rather, violence is a product of power. No matter how philosophically sophisticated one’s understanding of identity and difference may be, if one wields power, the Boyarins caution, one is liable to commit violence. The project of identity construction ultimately proves incidental to the anti-Zionist agenda. To resist the Zionist cult of national sovereignty – to renounce “Jewish hegemony qua Jewish hegemony” – the Boyarins would have Jews renounce human sovereignty as well.\textsuperscript{52} Unlike Butler, the Boyarins are lured back onto the traditional terrain of Jewish discourses of exile, unwittingly exposing the ultimate irrelevance of identity. Because the Boyarins approach questions of sovereignty indirectly (and somewhat disingenuously), however, they offer a feeble rejoinder to Zionist constructions of national sovereignty. To persuade contemporary Jews to be “perpetually out of power, “ like the rabbis, the Boyarins would need to offer either a full-fledged theology of Jewish passivity, or a full-fledged critique of self-determination as an ideal that is both unnecessary for Jews, and necessarily violent.\textsuperscript{53} In other words, the relevant debate does not surround fluid identities and the maintenance of cultural difference – it surrounds the legitimacy and extent of human power, and the possible forms of Jewish self-rule.

Having evaded this substantive debate, all that the Boyarins can offer non-Zionist politics is an exotic romance of the closet.\textsuperscript{54} If Butler locates “Jewishness” within the kitchen, Daniel Boyarin situates Jews in a more confined and confining domestic locale –

\textsuperscript{51} See Boyarins, “Diaspora,” 721: “Diasporic cultural identity teaches us that cultures are not preserved by being protected from ‘mixing’ but probably can only continue to exist as a product of such mixing.”

\textsuperscript{52} Boyarins, “Diaspora,” 713.

\textsuperscript{53} Boyarins, “Diaspora,” 722.

\textsuperscript{54} Jonathan Boyarin’s caution, in Powers, 32, notwithstanding: “Jewish diaspora should not be glamorized to the point of theoretical envy.”
the closet. The rabbinic strategy for resistance to Roman imperial rule is to “remain in the closet, as it were. Continue to live, continue to maintain Jewish practice, but do not behave in ways that draw attention or provoke the hostile intervention of the ruling powers. It is God who sent them to rule.” On this model, diaspora “politics” moves beyond the privatization of Judaism to insist on its closeting – which closeting it then casts as “resistance.” The power to survive foreign rule is the only kind of Jewish power that Boyarin will countenance, and it is perhaps the only kind of power one can countenance in a model that reserves agency to God (who sent them to rule). While Butler would encourage Jewish individuals to criticize Israel publicly, assuring them that such criticism is a “Jewish” thing to do, the Boyarins counsel Jews to do “what we do without getting in trouble,” and to use “evasiveness” – not politics – “in order to keep doing it.” This paean to the erotic appeal and moral infallibility of the closet illustrates theoretical and political liabilities of a diasporism that forsakes politics for identity. In the Boyarins’ hands, diasporism licenses retreat from politics, instead of taking up the challenge of envisioning Jewish self-rule on a model other than that of a Jewish state. To move beyond a diasporism that merely inverts Zionism’s terms, diasporic thinkers must acknowledge that renouncing the land need not entail renunciation of politics – both as an activity, and as a foundation for Jewish collectivity.

55 Boyarins, *Powers*, 70. See also 91: “Diaspora is essentially queer, and an end to diaspora would be the equivalent of becoming straight.” Boyarin mixes his homosexual metaphors in ways that verge on incoherence. Diaspora cannot be both queer and closeted. Indeed, queer political activism is emphatically “in your face,” refusing to hide queer sexuality or even conform to straight norms of etiquette and public decorum. In the words of a famous slogan from the 90s: “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it.”