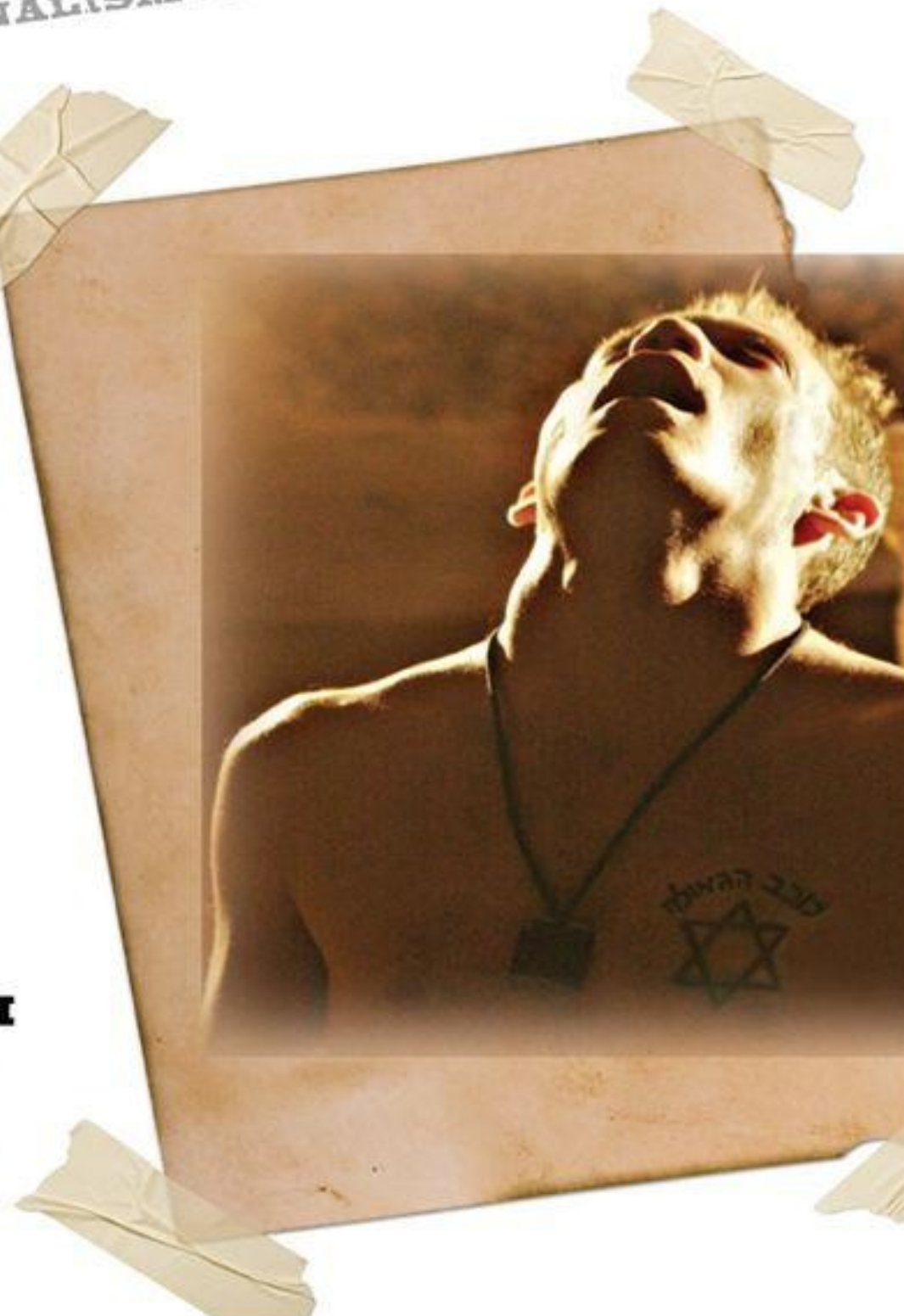


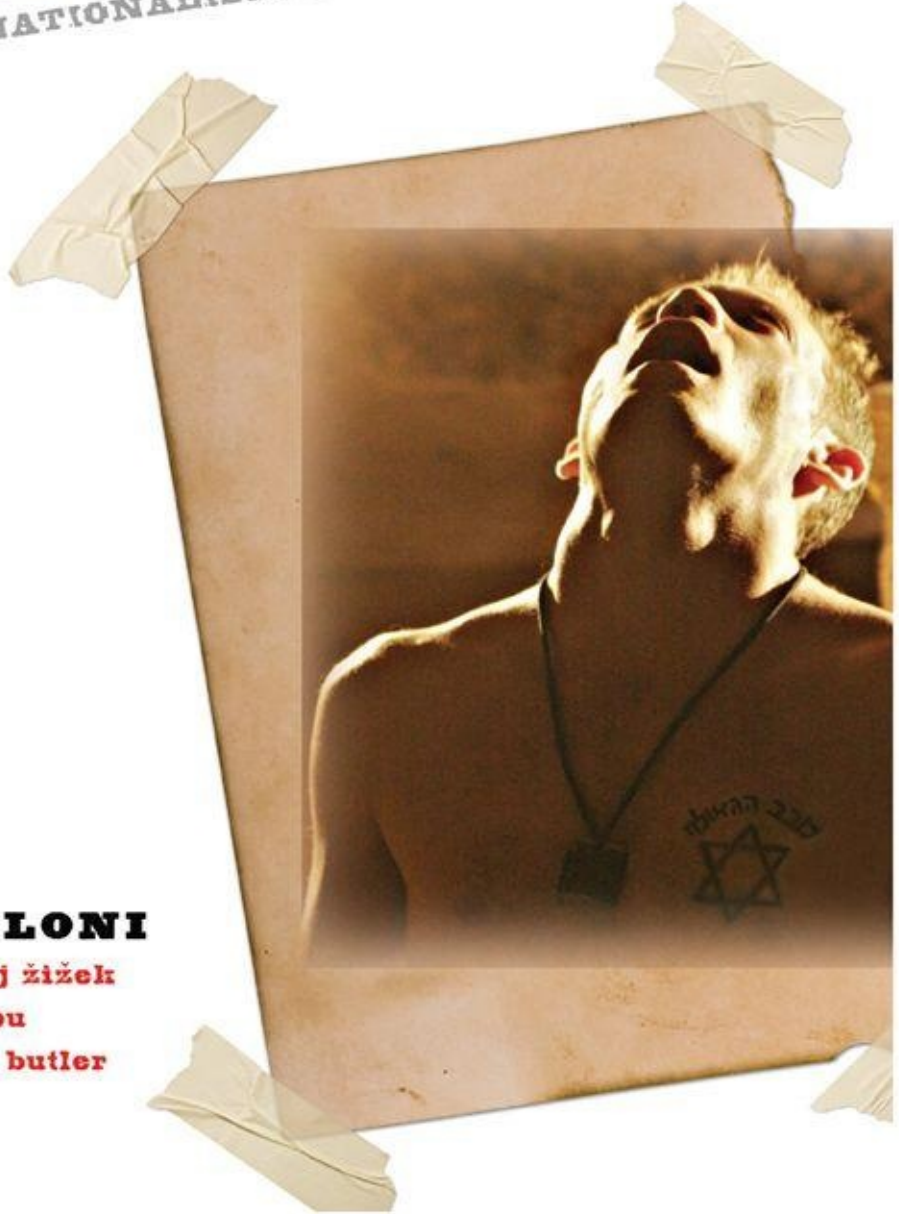
**WHAT DOES
A JEW WANT?**
ON BINATIONALISM AND OTHER SPECTERS

UDI ALONI

with **slavoj žižek**
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WHAT DOES A JEW WANT?

Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture

INSURRECTIONS: CRITICAL STUDIES IN RELIGION, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Slavoj Žižek, Clayton Crockett, Creston Davis, Jeffrey W. Robbins, editors

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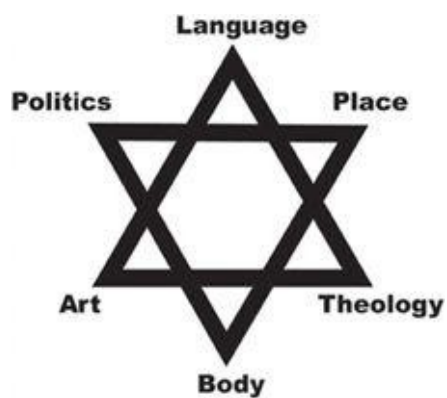
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WHAT DOES A JEW WANT?
On Binationalism and Other Specters



UDI ALONI
CONVERSATIONS AND COMMENTS BY
ALAIN BADIOU, JUDITH BUTLER, AND SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK



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Don Quixote

TO MY MOTHER, *Shulamit Aloni*

In the bedroom a drawing of Don Quixote.

In the living room a ceramic Don Quixote.

In the yard a sculpture of Don Quixote.

It seems to me you've placed them as an emblem

to remind you of the absurd, or pathetic, aspect of the struggle.

In your greatest battles the small demon of doubt was always there.

You've acted with the passion of the Man of La Mancha, and the doubt

and self-irony of Cervantes. I think it shaped your unique voice,

a radical voice

Devoid of self-importance,

fighting for what's right without

self-righteousness.

The questions Freud therefore leaves us with are: can so utterly indecisive and so deep undetermined a history ever be written? In what language, and with what sort of vocabulary? Can it aspire to the conditions of a politics of diaspora life? Can it ever become the not-so-precarious foundation in the land of Jews and Palestinians of a bi-national state in which Israel and Palestine are parts, rather than antagonists, of each other's history and underlying reality? I myself believe so.

—Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European*

It is well-known that the Jews were forbidden to look into the future. The Torah and the prayers instructed them, by contrast, in remembrance. This disenchanted those who fell prey to the future, who sought advice from the soothsayers. For that reason the future did not, however, turn into a homogenous and empty time for the Jews. For in it every second was the narrow gate through which the Messiah could enter.

—Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History"

This book is an attempt to think, to act, and to create through these two reflections.

Tel Aviv, 2011

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FOREWORD

JUDITH BUTLER

Udi Aloni's collection renews a theological reflection in the midst of ordinary life, popular culture, and contemporary scenes of life and death. His film, *Local Angel*, brings us into visual contact with Walter Benjamin's concept of the "ruin," that animated fragment from the past that drives us in ways that we cannot always know. He moves to the center of violent conflict between Israelis and Palestinians only to find there remnants of a theological relation to the "Temple Mount" that furtively circumscribes the struggle over land, property, ownership, and claims to time and space. In his film *Forgiveness* it is the land and the mental institution built there that acts as the ruin, foreclosing the possibility of a return to the death and displacement of Palestinians who lived in the village of Deir Yassin. The mental institution receives the Jew who emerges from the Nazi genocide as a *muselmann*—traumatized to the point of losing speech and self-reference. So the *muselmann*, the Muslim, the Christian, and the Jew are compounded at this multiple and unfathomable site of loss where, on the land where a Palestinian village was destroyed, an Israeli mental institution is built to receive the destroyed lives of Jews from the concentration camps. Madness ensues, but what alternative is there? In his meditation "Jocasta's Dream" Aloni makes clear that there are those humans who are murdered from the start, who live their murdered lives not only in spite of their apparent death but through the endless terms of that deathly world. Suicide is not simply a tragic conclusion but merely a sign that one has ceased to be able to stop the cycle of violence and the evisceration of those sites that allow for mourning to begin. There is no single loss in this terrain of destroyed villages, destroyed lives, only a question of whether the law that mandates continuing destruction can be openly opposed, whether the sites can be reclaimed for open mourning, and whether a new generation can break the curse that animates the places in their partial memories and constitutive disavowals, whether a wide enough angle can take in the full array of loss, mourning, violence, and inadvertent hope. Since hope, too, emerges in tandem with destruction, only because loss binds us, and binding is the condition for new community.

Aloni lays bare the visual landscape of these ruins, finding theological and mythological resonance in the political and emotional dilemmas they pose. And, in the laying bare, some hope emerges for a life that is not murdered from the start, whose birth is not implicated in the curse of revenge, whose ability to acknowledge an irreparable loss makes way for another future.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

A short circuit is a condition in which a short electrical path is unintentionally created, causing a power fault—and this is what Udi Aloni does in this book, causing a power fault in the ruling liberal attitude by way of short-circuiting different levels of ideology, art, and thought; rewriting the Oedipus myth and rejecting liberal Zionism. Who but Udi Aloni can combine the tremendous poetic power of creating new myths with the perspicuous mind of a cold theoretician? Who but Udi Aloni can ground his ruthless critique of Zionism into his unconditional fidelity to the Jewish tradition? If anyone needs a proof that political theology is alive and well, here it is!

This book has six vertices—the shape of the Star of David—and is Udi Aloni's take on the *Star of Redemption* by Franz Rosenzweig. Each of the six—Language, Body, Theology, Politics, Art, and Place—has its own separate part but is present in all the other parts as well.

In part 1, "Theology: 'Specters of Binationalism,'" Aloni argues that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be reexamined as an act of repression. The two nations quelled a geo-bio-political reality in which they were meant to live bi-nationally, from the dawn of modern time. Following the call of Edward Said, Aloni tried to create a new language that doesn't succumb to a false multiculturalism. His response to Said may exceed the agenda of most Western liberals, but his vision is painted in simple, bright colors. Through it we realize that this whole conflict is a diversion; it is not the expression of a truth, but the truth of a repression through the violence of social reality itself.

Part 2, "Body," is an attempt to read the body of mythological figures as theological-political texts. The body of Samson is converted to the body of a young dead Israeli soldier; Jacob fights the angel and transforms into the name Israel; and Jocasta, through the slaughter of the innocent, rewrites the story of her son Oedipus.

In part 3, "Place: 'Writing from Occupied Territories,'" Aloni describes life under a state of emergency by drawing out the comic moments—the absurd—from this brutal and violent reality. By unveiling the artificiality of the difference between "here" and "there" in segregation, he reveals the arbitrary iniquities that founded and maintain the ideology of the state.

In part 4, "Politics: Plea to Jewish Artists," Aloni takes off the gloves and exposes a new battle with the written and electronic media. He is transformed from a subtle artist into a ruthless fighter. He does not aim his slings and arrows at those who define themselves as nationalists, but at those who are among the "peace camp," the ones whose rhetoric of "human rights" and "nonviolence" exists on the side of the oppressor. Aloni's incisive writing reveals the duplicity and self-righteousness of an imperious ideology that places the speakers of this so-called liberalism as the loyal soldiers and gatekeepers of the current political system.

In part 5, "Art: Visual Midrash," Aloni puts his new binational language to use. He presents a series of intertextual tributes to Walter Benjamin, Franz Rosenzweig, Jacques Derrida, and Mahmoud Darwish. The image is familiar—but once freed by Aloni from its ideological chains it becomes a means of radical communication, a language redeemed, and an actual expression. A bond is created connecting Aloni's unique movie *Local Angel* and the angel of history—Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*—

looking back, incapacitated, on the ruins of Mediterranean history. An image captured in Aloni's *Paraphrase on Benjamin*: "He cannot resist the calling of the West, whose voice, like that of the siren, calls him backward into what we call progress. Meanwhile, the pile of debris before him grows skyward."

Part 6, "Language: Conversations and Comments," unfolds with the famous Jewish tradition of answering a question with a question. Thus, the question "what does a Jew want?" only raises more questions and doubts. Judith Butler, in conversations with Aloni, rethinks "the Jew," using far broader definitions and contexts, but with a greater obligation to ethics. "The Jew" becomes an ethical concept, affecting both the Jewish and non-Jewish alike. Alain Badiou, who visited Palestine with Aloni during the war in Gaza, apprehends Aloni's three movies as an example of the successful creation of art during our troubled times. When Aloni asks, "what does a Jew want?" I am reminded of the helpless Freud who, in the early days of psychoanalysis, as he gazed upon Dora, frustrated by futile attempts to understand, cried: "What does a woman want?"

In the same spirit of the Freud-Dora exchange, my modest contribution to this section is an essay titled "The Jew Is Within You, But You, You Are in the Jew." Undoubtedly, we shouldn't believe everything we hear, but Aloni's secular theology is definitely one of the most fascinating innovations of our time. So, if you want to dwell in your blessed secular ignorance, then do not read this book—your own risk!

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To my daughter Yuli, whose unique view has always inspired me.

To Ofer Neiman for the support, the patience, and the love that he lavished through his translation through help in moments of crisis, and through suggestions for physical exercise as well as for his endless support of the demonstrations in Sheikh-Jarrah and in Bil'in, where he always induces serenity and security upon those around him.

To Gal Hertz for his great help in thinking and scientific editing, in designing the theoretical structure of the book.

To Dr. Eyal Rozmarin for his invitation and encouragement to write "Samson the Non-European" and for its scientific editing. To Shlomzion Kenan for the devoted editing and for wonderful inventions in an impossible translation into English.

To Tom Yuval, who put the dyslexia in order.

To Columbia University Press and, in particular, Wendy Lochner, Christine Mortlock, and Susan Pensak who helped, labored, advised, organized, improved, and eventually transformed the vision of this book into a reality.

To Sarah Kamens, who helped me with her precision and insightfulness to transfer the spirit of the book as well as the tension between its mixed genres into the English language.



Jean-Luc Nancy once asked me, when he was preparing for a debate with Jacques Derrida, whether it is correct to claim that in Hebrew the word *beit kneset*, which means "synagogue," is in the plural form, and the word *Kneset*, which refers to the Israeli Parliament, is in the singular form. I thought that the question revolved around Derrida's attempt to describe the tension in Zionist thinking between exile as multiplicity and redemption as oneness. When presented in this form, we find ourselves facing a dichotomy in which each alternative excludes the other—either a concept of oneness, redemption, and negation of Diaspora or a multiplicity, which means Diaspora and relinquishing this fundamental striving for the one. Hence the fascinating aspect of Jewish monotheism of this type is the tension existing between oneness and multiplicity, on the one hand, and the testimony of the community, which tries to maintain this tension within the oneness itself. It is written in the book of Isaiah: "You are my witnesses, said the Lord," and the rabbi from Kutzk said: "If you cease to be my witnesses, I cease to be the Lord."

Apropos contrasting identities coexisting not in harmony but in creativity and prosperity, this is my opportunity to thank those three wonderful people who have been, and are still, guides for an entire generation. I have been honored to call all three my friends and partners on my journey. When people ask me why and how three people, who have such distinct views—Alain Badiou, Judith Butler, and Slavoj Žižek—have influenced my thought, I choose a different metaphor each time. Sometimes I utilize Lacan's four discourses: Master, University, Hysteric, Analyst (and, as any child in Paris knows, truth is revealed only in the transition from one discourse to another). Sometimes I utilize the Jewish *PaRDeS* simile, regarding the four levels of biblical interpretation (this Hebrew word is a

acronym for these levels: *Pshat* = literal, *Remez* = parable, *Drasha* = search, *Sod* = mystical. Sometimes I just say that these people fulfill different roles in the psyche of contemporary philosophical discourse: drive, fidelity, and love. But the wisdom and abundance that they have given to the world and to me has no measure. For all this I am thankful to them.

PROLOGUE

THE VISIT OF THE THREE MAGI TO THE HOLY LAND

Slavoj Žižek in Ramallah

Back to the Trauma Zone

MERAV YUDILOVITH

The Middle East premiere of Udi Aloni's film, which took place in Ramallah, was attended by the theoretician Slavoj Žižek. Two hours before the event, the second Lebanon war began. In spite of some fear, it was decided that the show must go on. As Israel entered Lebanon, the hall in Ramallah was packed with viewers, intellectuals and Palestinian artists and filmmakers. Among them was also Mahmoud Darwish.

QALANDIA CHECKPOINT: WEDNESDAY MORNING

Inside the air-conditioned transit van bearing a German license plate, the blazing sun is less of a nuisance. A long line of cars is crawling slowly. Soldiers, ID cards, the bureaucratic commotion aboveground, can make one forget, for short spells of time, the tensions bubbling underneath: the kidnapped soldiers, the mass draft, shelling, and the dead people in Gaza and on the northern border. The tension between the seemingly obvious reality and the scarred zones is the ground on which filmmaker Udi Aloni's film, *Forgiveness*, takes place. The film's world premiere was held last night in Ramallah.

"People flee from traumatic zones in an attempt to find a new life, only to find out that they are going back to the terror time and again," Aloni wrote in the film's commentary notes, which raise among other issues, questions about the cost of holding onto life or death and about the place of reason in all this existential chaos. In the film, as in life between Tel Aviv and Ramallah, one moves back and forth between the conscious and the unconscious, between troubled regions of the psyche that threaten to devour one's sanity and the reality that requires one to take action in order to survive.

"Udi Aloni's film has accomplished Eisenstein's old dream about a film as a form of thought," says Slavoj Žižek, who is accompanying the premieres in Ramallah and in West Jerusalem, "He brings different layers together for comparison—the Holocaust and Israel's treatment of the Palestinian hangmen and victims, the political and the private, reality and dreams—without proposing a direct solution. Aloni forces the viewer to start thinking and to look for possible solutions. The film does not elicit cold appreciation but deep emotional involvement, and the emotional state of compression in many of the scenes is almost unbearable. In spite of being a thoroughly critical piece of work, it also allows the viewer to experience the spirit of Judaism deeply."

Žižek arrived in Ramallah in the midst of a principled, continuous debate between him and the organizers of the global Campaign for an Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel. In an open letter to Professor Žižek, the campaign organizers asked him not to participate in the Jerusalem Film Festival. "Think of the ethical implications when you consider accepting an invitation from a body which not only benefits from the Israeli establishment's support, but also constitutes a foundation stone of Israel's attempts to portray itself as a part of the civilized world, while exercising malicious colonialist oppression and racism against Palestinians," they write. "We hope you do not legitimiz

this oppression by participating in the festival, regardless of the significance of the film which you are about to discuss. Do not put a pretty face on an ugly reality.” As an act of solidarity with his Palestinian friends, Žižek has informed the organizers of the Jerusalem Film Festival that he would return the money paid for his accommodations. He chose to participate in the discussion of the movie but only as Aloni’s guest.

“A change has to come from within,” he explains, “making people listen even to things they are reluctant to hear. This is not an easy decision, but I think that the best solution is to maintain the right of Israelis to try and bring about a change in the minds of other Israelis, through art and various means, while respecting the Palestinian way of struggle.”

On the way to Ramallah he says: “The screening of Udi Aloni’s film in Ramallah is essential because an internal Israeli dialogue which merely makes you feel good about yourselves does no good. Liberal critique has failed, by presenting a false humanism which gives one that good feeling, but at the same time also enables one to ignore the other in a brutal manner.

He regards the screening in Ramallah as a test.

This screening is not just important, it is essential. Without it, the film is a complete political forgery. Not going to Ramallah means taking a subtle form of racist action. This is a test, without which Udi would have become as fake as Oliver Stone’s American films about the Vietnam War. Even if these films present a critical point of view, they always focus on the American young man’s drama. This is the worst thing about Hollywood movies—even when they try to be honest—the subjective point is that eventually one always comes back to the American hero. They don’t really recognize the other. *Forgiveness* goes beyond that. It stays away from the formula and eliminates the borders. Prima facie, it may be perceived as a movie embarking on a journey from the viewpoint of a young Jewish man, but it is not exactly like that. The others in Udi’s film are more than a mere backdrop.

At the entrance to Ramallah, Aloni starts getting emotional. Along with cinematographer George Khleifi, playwright Salman Mansour, and Haled Hourani, representative of Artists Without Borders, distinguished Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish has also confirmed his participation in the event. Before the screening, Aloni says that “Darwish’s poetry has had a great deal of influence on me and on my art. It is a great honor to have him here.” On the stairs leading out of the cinema, Darwish praised the film and said, “It is a beautiful and significant film. The key point in the film is the question regarding who has the right to make the victim forget.”

From this point onward, Aloni seemed much more relaxed. “It was important for me that the friends in Ramallah, who cannot make it to Jerusalem because of the apartheid policy, watch the film. I hope that the people at the Jerusalem Film Festival realize this, open their hearts, and look around. The movie was born of grace. Law and grace are two very important elements in Jewish religion, and they too should not be forgotten. Now, of all times, when we are in a chaotic state of war, when people are losing their sanity and the guns are firing, being able to sit together in Ramallah and talk to each other through art opens the gates of hope. There is an alternative, and we need the will to follow it.”

Ramallah; published by YNET, July 13, 2006.

Alain Badiou in Haifa

Their Entire Particular World

The history of mankind is the instant between two strides taken by a wanderer.

—Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebook*

Alain Badiou landed in Tel Aviv amidst the assault on Gaza. I had been waiting for his coming to Palestine/Israel for a while. He came to support my retrospective at the cinematheque and lecture at the Palestinian Al Quds University and at the University of Nablus (An-Najah). But the war reshuffled all the cards. We couldn't go out in Tel Aviv. The roaming laughter of the city celebrating itself created a shocking dissonance with the sounds of war, broadcast live from Gaza. So we decided to quit the city and travel to the Galilee to visit the Palestinian citizens of Israel and stand shoulder to shoulder with them in vigils against the awful war. We stood with the singer Amal Morcos and held picket signs with actor Saleh Bakri and other young Palestinians who wanted to tell Israelis "It is our brothers that you are killing." But Israel is absent from Israel, and no one is there to hear the outcry.

The destruction and death Israel laid on Gaza was heartbreaking and stomach turning; it was difficult to see Palestinian Israelis of the Galilee, time and again, identify the dead of Gaza as their relatives. The wall and Occupation created a complete separation between the Palestinians who live in Gaza and those who are citizens of Israel. The dead Gazans reminded those in the Galilee that once, at least before their unity was split, they had been one people. Badiou gave splendid lectures in public meetings and at the Palestinian universities. I assume these will, sooner or later, be published. But our experience we went through together in Haifa will remain with me forever.

Alain came with his son Oliver, whom he adopted with his ex-wife Cecile, a physician specializing in AIDS medicine. When Oliver's dying mother was expelled back to Africa, she pledged Cecile to take care of her infants. Cecile, apart from being a physician and a leftist activist of Jewish descent, was also a unique woman with the kind of heart that is hard to find in this world. She adopted Oliver, the younger of the sons with Badiou, and his first wife adopted the older son.

When we arrived in Haifa, Oliver was especially excited. It was hard to see in him an eighteen-year-old teenager. Against the background of Haifa, this African French-speaking young man had a uniquely exotic appearance. Suddenly he asked to see the house his mother had visited every summer when she was a girl. Her Jewish grandfather made aliyah and had resided in a charming house on top of Mt. Carmel, and she cherishes numerous memories of those wonderful summer vacation recollections she has shared with her son Oliver.

We were able to find the house, based on address and memory, and silently stepped out of the car in a search for roots. Oliver approached the doorstep of his great-grandfather's former house and buzzed the doorbell excitedly. No one answered, yet he kept on staring at a tree in the yard as if he had known it for years. Badiou stood on the side—that universalist and rationalist philosopher, that set-theorist.

man—looking lovingly at his grown and beautiful black son, standing in front of the house of a long-deceased little Jewish doctor. He turned to me and said, in his charming French accent, “Udi, look how excited he is, as if he was coming back home; look, look,” he said, “he is wiping a tear from his eyes so that I would not see the tears in his own eyes.

I gazed, an Israeli among Jewish refugees, at the French communist philosopher, the white-haired tall man, looking at his African refugee son mourning the death of his mother’s grandfather, the Jewish refugee who arrived in Haifa and became a beloved dentist.

That very Haifa whose Palestinian refugee stories from ’48 we have come to know so well. At that moment I thought to myself that there is nothing that can more lucidly describe the nature of the universalism, which grows from the recognition and love for wandering refugees who carry with them on their backs, their entire particular world wherever they go.

Judith Butler in Sheikh-Jarrah

“This place which is called Israel”

I went to the airport to pick Judith Butler up last Friday. She had some work to do before the start of her lectures at Birzeit University. My friend Ronnie, who gave up a very bright future in the high-tech industry for scurrying between demonstrations against the Occupation, drove us from the Ben Gurion Airport.

One little smile from Ronnie and the car changed its course—we were on our way to Sheikh-Jarrah’s Friday demonstration.

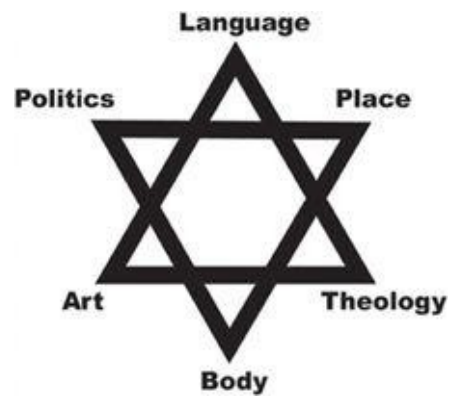
After all, who if not Butler believes in performative repetition as an opening for change in the current ideological structure? And who if not Ronnie, along with the group of anarchists, performs the ceremony by going to Bil’in, Ni’lin, and Sheikh-Jarrah every Friday? A sacred ritual aimed at undermining the stability of everything that we take for granted.

Upon arrival, we were greeted by fierce Jerusalem rain. Since the court ruled that the demonstration is legal, the police have refrained from violence. I walked with Judith on the road, translating the messages on the signs held by the protesters, while everyone called out, “Come on, get back on the sidewalk!” Meanwhile, the rain got heavier. Someone from the queer anarchist community came up and got very emotional when she saw who it is: “You must be... hi... yes, yes, I heard you lecturing at the university some time ago!” Within seconds at least ten demonstrators, some of them carrying drumsticks, gathered around little Judith and covered her with love. The rain kept getting heavier, but when I tried to move the group to a roofed venue I was silenced like a nagging Jewish mother. There was something very exciting about this humble, sincere encounter between Judith Butler and her “disciples.” Some of them may not have read her complex texts, but they have identified the performative proposal she has offered to the world as a means of change. It was obvious that the encounter was a heartfelt moment for Judith.

The beating of the drums got stronger and stronger... as did the rain. It was time to head back and go to grab something to eat. On the way, I got an anxious text message from Ofer, the charming Israeli leftist who runs *Occupation Magazine*. “What do you think Judith meant when she wrote: ‘this place which is called Israel’ instead of ‘the State of Israel’?”

Over a glass of wine I formulated a text message to Ofer: “Dear Ofer, no one was disputing our existence. I’m not sure if that’s Judith’s intention, however, until everyone in our region has permanently accepted name and permanent accepted status, and until all the communities have recognized accepted borders under one or two states—there is no justification for one place to have an established, agreed-upon name while the other has barely a temporary one. L’chaim!”

Haaretz, February 12, 2010.



THEOLOGY
“SPECTERS OF BINATIONALISM”

A Manifesto for the Jewish-Palestinian Arabic-Hebrew State

A specter haunts the Middle East, the daunting specter of Palestinian-Jewish binationalism. All the world's powers have joined hands to conduct a holy war to the bitter end, until that specter is defeated. One can read the entire modern history of the region as the history of a violent lasting conflict instigated to deny and expel that specter.

Now, after one hundred years of conflict, with no solution in sight, the time has come to present binationalism in all its glory.

J'accuse.

We are already a decade into the twenty-first century, and still the only visible change in the Middle East is deterioration. The everyday relation between the Jewish and Palestinian nations, the two nations living in this shared land, is a clear and deteriorating relationship of occupier to occupied, dominance to weakness, manifesting exploitation, racism, humiliation, landgrab, and violence. It is true that on the symbolic level relations are much more complex, but the bottom line is that the Jewish nation is sovereign inside territorial contiguity, enjoying democratic, economic, and cultural freedom.

In contrast, the Palestinian nation is divided between five different physical, economic, and cultural provinces that are hermetically separated in a way that does not allow the existence of a political community. The silence of the Western world, and its massive support for Israel, perpetuate this flagrantly illegal situation. The West is better off letting the Jewish nation guard, in an immoral manner, the immoral wall in the immoral frontier state so as to keep the conflict away from the heart of the empire, where there is still a semblance of the rule of law. Leaders in the Arab world (or the Muslim world, depending on one's point of view) are better off placing the Palestinian people as a human bulwark against the West, while they are free to both conduct commercial relations with the West and maintain an apparent ideological arena through which they criticize the West in the symbolic realm.

In the symbolic realm relations are much more complex: they are not about the balance of power, financial profit, or control of land, water, and natural resources. In this realm one also has to consider overt and covert theological structures. It is about relations of longing, jealousy, and passion, the simultaneous desire for sameness and separateness. Thus, this small piece of land containing the names *Israel* and *Palestine* has become an intense critical mass containing all the tensions between East and West, between North and South, between religions, and between religious and secular thought. The Middle East has become the place where the world brings together all the ideological oppositions, like a testing ground for various ideological explosions. Therefore, one moment before this ancient mythology-infested place implodes into a black hole powerful enough to swallow the whole world, we propose binationalism as the only living alternative.

Binationalism is perhaps the only possibility for a new place, a new beginning and a new language, the only possibility for Israel-Palestine, for the Middle East, and maybe for the entire world.

THE POSSIBILITY OF BINATIONALISM

The binational idea has existed ever since nationalist movements first emerged in the Middle East.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, it was not the outcome of some crisis of faith among adherents of conflicting national ambitions who finally concluded that the two-state solution, a cornerstone of the ideologies, could never actually be implemented. In fact, the binational idea is so deeply rooted in the region that the entire Middle East conflict can be interpreted as the history of its rejection. In such a narrative, A Manifesto for the Jewish-Palestinian State 15 the earliest fears of binationalism gradually empowered religious and nationalist objectives, which consequently led to the ultimate demise of any underlying humanist ideologies. This is why the binational idea must be reintroduced into the public discourse. We must gain a deeper understanding of why it was rejected outright, if only because it may yet be the last chance we have to avoid the apocalyptic cataclysm now brewing in the feverish ranks of our nationalist and religious fundamentalists.

In order to achieve this, we must first recognize that the goal of binationalism is not simply to tear down the ghetto that we have erected for the indigenous Palestinians with whom we share this land. We must also tear down the golden ghetto walls with which we have encircled ourselves. While many believe that history always repeats itself, this does not necessarily mean that we must repeat the same mistakes or reproduce the same injustices so typical of classical colonialist movements in the last century. Binationalism could well be the ultimate source of resolution for a people that was almost annihilated on the altar of racism and ethnic homogeneity. We can offer no greater good to the world than to build a new society on a foundation of multiple ethnic and religious distinctions.

Binationalism is not a new idea dreamed up by some fringe philosopher or other. It is the reality that we still refuse to recognize. More than one million Palestinians now live *within* (that is, west of) the Green Line, which is the 1949 armistice line, recognized by international law as the border of the state of Israel. The territory east of the Green Line (the West Bank) has been occupied by Israel since 1967. Palestinians living west of the Green Line are also called “1948 Arabs,” and they hold Israeli citizenship. In Jerusalem, Haifa, and in many other towns, Jews and Arabs have long lived together. We cannot etch out some boundary line to divide their neighborhoods in Haifa and Jerusalem. We cannot construct a Separation Wall between the Bedouin scattered throughout the Negev and the farms of their Jewish neighbors or between the Arab towns of the Galilee and Jewish outposts, kibbutzim, and development towns. Not only would this be impossible, it would represent Israel’s ultimate moral failure—an ethical crisis faced by a society that is willing to take whatever steps deemed necessary further the cause of racial segregation. With over half a million Jewish settlers now living across the Green Line, Israelis have no right to raise the gauntlet and challenge them: “What does that settlement mean to you—to you, and not to us?” Of course not, because each and every settlement was funded and supported by all the successive governments of the past; each and every settlement received its rubber stamp of approval from the nation’s Supreme Court. The current situation is irreversible. The Occupied Territories are an integral part of a single, cohesive state. The same is true of Palestinians on both sides of the Green Line. They have watched as their land was stolen, from Land Day in the Galilee until today in the West Bank. And yet, regardless of where they live—in Israel, Jerusalem, the Occupied Territories, or even in the Palestinian Diaspora—they have emerged as a united people. Today no state in the world has the right to carve them up between two sovereign and distinct entities as part of some permanent solution.

Today no American would dare ask whether it is possible to create a country where blacks and whites are treated equally; the assumption of equality is a given, and the question is now what the necessary preconditions for equality are. The same is true for us. We refuse to accept the possibility that Palestinians will be unequal to Jews throughout the Israeli-Palestinian space. The problems that may result down the road are irrelevant.

We live in a binational reality in which the two-state solution has become little more than an empty cliché intended to preserve the status quo. As such, the time has come to recognize that there is only

sample content of What Does a Jew Want?: On Binationalism and Other Specters (Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture)

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