Hannah Arendt and the Challenge of Jewish Sovereignty

Why Arendt is Celebrated in Post-Zionist Circles

By Yiftach Ofek

Being a society in crisis is not the same as being a society with "problems". Problems are temporary and soluble. But a crisis seems to hit much deeper. There must be something in the air, some feeling that society is on the brink of disaster, staring into the abyss. Israelis very much feel this way. Different people may have different interpretations of the crisis, but that the crisis is there has become undeniable.

Israelis feel their country has at some point gone astray. The lofty ideals espoused by its founders fade into memory and are cataloged as utopian aspirations. Rather than a model society, "a light unto the nations", Israel now deals with poverty, war, and a loss of faith in the reasons for its existence. Some have named this crisis "The Battle for Israel's Soul". This is a good way to describe it, because it immediately brings to mind the old philosophical question raised by Plato of how the soul should be properly ordered. In the classics the question of the individual's soul was inseparable from the question of the best regime, and therefore the question of soul becomes a political question of the highest order. Moreover, as it is in Plato, the "battle for the soul" is also a question of the proper education. Politics and education are inseparable. And a great part of the origins of Israel's current crisis can be traced back to its education system. The "Battle for Israel's Soul" will not be fought on the ground, but within the walls of academia.

Looking to the intellectual battlefield, one could not help noticing the rise of an unusual star: Hannah Arendt. To an American reader, this may sound surprising, as in America Arendt had been a figure much debated and discussed for years. Since her death in 1975, and even more so since the 1990's, Arendt scholarship has been on a steady increase, not just in America, but in the world as a whole. Streets, research institutes, prestigious awards, and even a train line connecting Hannover and Berlin have been named in her honor. Arendt's reception was not always positive (one need only to remember the historian Russell Jacoby's claim that "If her star shines so brightly it is because the American intellectual firmament is so dim"), but criticism of Arendt does not take away from the fact that she is a much-discussed figure in the academic world.

Arendt's reception in Israel was completely different. Until the late 1990's, Arendt's name was largely absent from either public or academic discourse. There were a few individual responses to her 1963 coverage of the Eichmann Trial, notably by distinguished Israeli historian Jacob Talmon, but on the whole, Arendt was virtually ignored. Reasons for this dismissal seem to be historical. Arendt originally became popular in the early 1950's, with the publication of her book *"The Origins of Totalitarianism"*. The world at the time was still trying to understand what was happening. The Second World War had ended with a resounding victory of the Allies over the Fascist dictatorship, but a new totalitarian threat was hovering over Europe, this time from the Communist east. The recent destruction of Europe's Jews at a pace and with a brutality hitherto unknown had made people think again about the origins of evil and hatred. In Asia, Africa and the Middle East, nations began to revolt against the imperialist conquerors and demanded independence. *"The Origins of Totalitarianism"*, divided into the three sections "Anti-Semitism", "Imperialism", and "Totalitarianism", tied all the knots together. It was a timely book that

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offered a timely analysis. But there was something more about Arendt. She offered an entirely novel way to think about the western philosophical tradition. She challenged the hermit-like tendencies that she believed characterized philosophy (the "vita contemplativa"), and called on mankind to revive the thriving political life of the ancient Greek polis (the "vita activa").

In an age characterized by revolutions in the Third World, and student uprisings in the west, Arendt seemed more relevant than ever to a generation in search of a spiritual leader. Post-modernists who challenged meta-narratives were fascinated with Arendt's deconstruction of the western philosophical tradition. Post-colonialists were drawn to her analysis of the origins and consequences of imperialism. Marxists and socialists were sympathetic to her analysis of the role of capital and trade in the formation of government policy, and to her writings about revolution. Historians and sociologists were drawn to her interdisciplinary approach. Anti-communist Liberals supported her anti-Soviet rhetoric (as in her article about the 1956 Hungarian Revolt). And let us also not forget the feminists, who saw in Arendt a sole female representative in an almost exclusively male philosophical canon. It is easy to see why Arendt reached an idol-like status; a rare position in her field. Yet in Israel things were different. In the 1950's and '60's, when Arendt became famous for her critique of totalitarianism, Israel was still a young democracy dealing with questions of establishment. Before turning to philosophy, Israel still had to secure its borders, and accommodate for the thousands of refugees that arrived en masse on its shores. The problems of the hour took precedence, and Arendt received very little attention, if at all, even though she was already quite well-known.

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The change in her status in Israel came about only in 1997, when a special conference was dedicated to her at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Then, in 2000, her book on the Eichmann Trial was translated into Hebrew for the first time. In 2003, another special conference took place, this time at the University of Tel-Aviv. The papers from these Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv conferences were published in book-form, and over the years other translations into Hebrew, by or about her. were published. These include Arendt's biography ("*For Love of the World*" by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl), her monumental *"The Origins of Totalitarianism"*, and her series of lectures on Kant's political philosophy. In 2009, even a play was produced based on her youthful romance with Heidegger.

Was Israel merely catching up with what has been called by renowned British historian Walter Laqueur the "Arendt cult"? Perhaps. Maybe the current crisis is making Israelis look for new spiritual leaders where they did not look before. And indeed, there are good reasons to turn to Arendt. After all, she is considered one of the foremost Jewish thinkers in the twentieth century. Moreover, she is one of the only Jewish thinkers famous on an international scale who dedicated a considerable amount of her corpus to the question of Jewish Sovereignty, Zionism. Yet there is something problematic about Israelis turning to Arendt for spiritual leadership at this time of crisis. An examination of her Zionist writings reveal a person terribly conflicted over the question of Jewish nationhood. This would not have been a problem in itself, as many Jews have expressed similar anxieties about the Zionist project. The problem is that Arendt seems to have allowed her personal conflicts to turn into a political theory that is at times delusional, and at times quite venomous. It is therefore debatable whether Arendt is really the spiritual guide that Israelis need at this hour.

The genesis of Arendt's views on Zionism seems to be intricately bound with her biography. She was born in 1906 to an assimilated middle-class Jewish home in Germany. In 1924 she began studying at the University of Marburg, where she met the charismatic Martin Heidegger. As is well-known by now, the two began an affair that would affect Arendt deeply for the rest of her life. It eventually caused her to change her place of study, transferring to the University of Heidelberg, where she wrote her doctoral dissertation on Saint Augustine under the supervision of the psychologist and philosopher Karl Jaspers. When the Nazis came to power, Arendt escaped to Paris, where she became close with the Zionist activist Kurt Blumenfeld. Under Blumenfeld's influence, Arendt started defining herself a Zionist. While in Paris she assisted Jewish children refugees' emigration to the Mandate of Palestine (governed by Britain at the time), and wrote pamphlets advocating the creation of a Jewish Army to help in the struggle against Nazism. Unfortunately for her, the only ones to express interest in her initiative were representatives of the right-wing Irgun in America, whose help she rejected. At the same time, Arendt wrote a biography of the Jewish salon

hostess Rahel Varnhagen, who converted to Christianity in attempt to be better accepted by Aryan society. In 1941, Arendt relocated to the United States, and became a naturalized citizen in 1950. In 1951 she published "*The Origins of Totalitarianism",* which made her a popular speaker across campuses in America and Europe. In 1961, she was sent on behalf of *"The New Yorker*" to report on the Eichmann Trial.

The series of reports she published from the trial caused a big scandal in her relationship with the Jewish community. But this relationship was never easy. Although she never denied being Jewish, Arendt's view of her own Jewish identity was rather ambiguous. Academically, at least, Arendt didn't really seem to take an interest in Jews or Jewish matters unless it involved non-Jews. After all, she wrote her doctoral dissertation on a Christian saint. She wrote a biography of a Jewess who converted to Christianity in attempt to be accepted by gentile society. She always dealt with Jews in the context of European phenomena – Romanticism, Nationalism, Socialism, Nazism, etc. – and as Chicago's Professor of History Bernard Wasserstein has recently shown, her understanding of the Jewish condition in Europe in the modern period was based mostly on anti-Semitic propaganda. The Eichmann reports merely exacerbated an inner conflict Arendt must have been feeling throughout her life between her Jewish and German identities. Michael Wyschogrod, professor emeritus of philosophy at City University of New York, who knew Arendt personally, attests that "Arendt was as deeply German as they came, although she did not lack a significant Jewish identity. I suspect, however, that her German identity was deeper than her Jewish one". His suspicion seems to be correct. Arendt herself wrote after the "Eichmann scandal" that if she "can be said to 'have come from anywhere', it is from the tradition of German philosophy".

Arendt's attempt to distance herself from the Jews seems to have taken the most venomous turn when it concerned Israeli Jews. Although she considered the judges in the Eichmann Trial to be "the best of German Jewry", and the prosecuting attorneys "Galicians, but still Europeans", everyone else present at the trial was cast as barbaric. She wrote to her husband: "everything is organized by a police force that gives me the creeps, speaks only Hebrew, and looks Arabic. Some downright brutal types among them. They would obey any order. And outside the doors, the oriental mob, as if one were in Istanbul or some other half-Asiatic country". Indeed, harsh. Especially in comparison with her accounts of Germany in other letters, where everything was *wunderschön*, the forests were beautiful, and the Rheine waters crystal clear.

But why such malice? Why such spiteful words? Was she distancing herself from the Israelis in order to better distance herself from the Jews in general?

We should not discount such an option. Following the "Eichmann controversy", renowned Kabbalah scholar Gerschom Scholem wrote to her saying that it bothered him she lacked any "Love of the Jewish people". Surprisingly (or not), Arendt replied that he was right. "I am not moved by any 'love' of this sort […] I have never 'loved' any people or collective – neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed love 'only' my friends". But it is one thing to "not love" a people. With the Israelis, her sentiments seem to border on downright contempt, and suggest a prejudice that is deep-rooted.

Indeed, looking over her writings from the 1940's and early 1950's, the years before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and during the first years of Israel's existence, one is struck by how consistent Arendt's disdain for anything Israeli really was. She criticized the Zionist movement all the way back to its inception in the 19th century, and from her depiction it appears that the whole development of Jewish sovereignty was one protracted catastrophe. She also gave the Zionist movement several pieces of advice on how to avoid the imminent calamity she was describing.

Unfortunately for her, as happened with her earlier suggestions about the establishment of a Jewish Army, her comments were ignored by the Zionist establishment. Was this the reason for her animosity towards Israelis? We cannot know for certain. But we can hardly blame the Israeli establishment for not heeding to her advice. Her suggestions seem to move on the vector between implausible on the one hand, and bizarre on the other. Let us then turn to examining her actual views.

Norman Podhoretz, who had many conversations with Arendt on the subject of Zionism, summed them up in his memoir in the following way: "What exactly she wanted I have never been able to ascertain; mainly she seemed intent on showing that everyone else was wrong". But let us examine the validity of his remarks. After all, Arendt wrote a series of articles elucidating her views on the subject.

Her opinions were based on the assumption that the age of nation-states was about to pass from the world. She believed the nation state was "neither capable of protecting the existence of the nation nor able to guarantee the sovereignty of the people", and for that reason the "problem of how to organize politically" would be solved from that point onwards only through "adopting either the form of empire or the form of federations". She wanted to put in place "the fundamentals of an international community, capable of

presenting and protecting the civilization of the modern world", and since she judged the age of nation-states to be over, she rejected the Zionist national solution. She accused Zionism of not being in alignment with history, and therefore saw in Zionism an experiment doomed to failure, like all attempts at creating nation-states. Writing some years before the Jews succeeded in establishing a state, and several decades before 1989 brought a new wave of nation-states into being, Arendt predicted the imminent disappearance of this form of political organization. Her analysis is reminiscent of, among others, Vladimir Lenin, who also spoke of the eventual "withering away of the state".

But she did not exactly reject Zionism altogether. Unlike some who believe that the Jews could be resettled in Europe – solutions proposed by example by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or Helen Thomas – Arendt *did* see a place for Jews in the Middle East. Just not in their own state. She believed that the Jewish-Arab question was impossible to solve through the national framework. Being the political theorist that she claimed to be, she thus embarked on suggesting to the Jews a way to resolve their conflict with the Arabs. Her advice was to emulate the example of the Soviet model of settling national conflicts (!): the Soviet Union's "entirely new and successful approach to nationality conflicts, its new form of organizing different peoples on the basis of national equality". Granted, she wrote these things in 1944, when the full extent of Soviet atrocities was not yet known. But to recommend the Soviet approach seems bewildering, especially from a woman who in a few years would publish a book on totalitarianism.

She thought that a good solution would be something resembling a "bi-national Palestine State or a Jewish Commonwealth". But we should bear in mind that her solution is not that same as the modern bi-national state solution. Rather, her ideas resemble the 19th century utopian communities conceived by Marx or, again, Lenin. Arendt believed in the establishment of "local Arab-Jewish committees under the supervision and the auspices of an international authority", and the creation of a "federated state" governed by "Jewish-Arab community councils".

Instead of a Jewish State, she advised the Jews to aspire to construct a "homeland". In this homeland, "local self-government and mixed Jewish-Arab municipal and rural councils, on a small scale and as numerous as possible, are the only realistic political measures that can eventually lead to the political emancipation of Palestine". Other than this solution, she saw "not a single possible solution or proposition" that could solve the problems. The use of the term "realistic" is not meant to be ironic.

Arendt imagined a Middle East similar in style to the European model of integration that was being established at the time. She advocated the idea of a "federated state" and a "Confederation of Palestine" that could serve as model not only for the Jews and Arabs, but also for other conflicts in the Middle East, such as that between Christian Lebanon and Muslim Syria.

It is important to mention that Arendt acknowledged that these ideas were not her own. Their origins can be found with a group of Jewish intellectuals who established an organization generally known by the name of "Brit Shalom" (The Alliance for Peace). Some of its more well-known members include the aforementioned Scholem, and also Martin Buber. But whereas Scholem and Buber remained Zionists, Arendt did not. This group never consisted of more than a few dozen intellectuals at the time, and was pretty much disbanded by the late 1930's. Nonetheless, despite its brief life, Brit Shalom had elicited waves of nostalgia disproportionate to its level of influence. Here was a group of Jews sincerely committed to sharing the land with the local Arabs. The fact that their ideas were rejected has served as "proof" to several generations of left-wing Jews (and others) that Israelis are just not interested in peace. More recently, acclaimed gender studies professor Judith Butler of Berkeley expressed such ideas. But this nostalgia is often accompanied by selective memory. The reason that the group disbanded was not because the mainstream Zionist establishment rejected them. It was because of the lack of a similar initiative on the Arab side.

To Arendt this mattered little. The supposed rejection of "Brit Shalom" ideas just proved to her once again the horrible trajectory the Zionist movement followed. In her defense, it must be said that she applied severe criticism to the Arab side as well. She believed that both Jews and Arabs wanted to "fight it out at any price"; a sign of "sheer irrationality". In contradistinction to her image as a democratic theorist, Arendt exhibited an unusual elitism as far the Middle East was concerned. She did not trust the "masses" on either the Arab or Jewish sides. She wanted the United Nations to "summon up the courage" and appeal to "those Jewish and Arab individuals who at present are isolated because of their records as sincere believers in Arab-Jewish cooperation". She appealed to those few Jews who "have shown in these bitter days [i.e. after 1947, when the U.N. resolution on the partition of Palestine was followed by a homicidal campaign by the Arabs against the local Jews – Y.O.] that they have too much wisdom and too great a sense of responsibility to follow blindly where desperate, fanaticized masses would lead them", and to those "few Arabs who are unhappy about the increasingly fascist coloration of their national movement", to negotiate a truce. Yet regardless of the responsibility she laid on Arabs for becoming "increasingly fascist", it is obvious that she saves the

blame for the problems of the Middle East for the Jews. If the Jews were in a precarious position, it must have been because of their own doing.

Arendt linked Zionism with the three main motifs of her "*The Origins of Totalitarianism*" – anti-Semitism, imperialism and totalitarianism. It should be noted that unlike future critics of Israel, she explicitly stated that "the building of a Jewish National Home was not a colonial enterprise in which Europeans came to exploit foreign riches with the help and at the expense of native labor". Nonetheless, in her articles from the forties she casts the lot of the State of Israel with that of the collapsing European imperial powers, as a result of the Zionist adherence to the idea of the national-state. "Nationalism is bad enough when it trusts in nothing but the rude force of the nation. A nationalism that necessarily and admittedly depends upon the force of a foreign nation is certainly worse". But what "foreign nation" was she talking about? The British, who were ruling Palestine at the time, most certainly didn't help the Jews establish a state. The Americans didn't either. The only ones who supplied the Jews with weapons were the Soviets, who perceived the Jews to be a bulwark *against* Western imperialism.

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It seems that Arendt was caught in the force of her own rhetoric, and for that reason she was not ashamed to designate this nascent democracy "totalitarian". In May 1948, just before the proclamation of independence, Arendt described the general atmosphere in Israel as that where "terrorism and the growth of totalitarian methods are silently tolerated and secretly applauded". Yes, there was terrorism. But there was also persecution of Jewish extremists by the official Zionist bodies. There was also the World Zionist Congress' condemnation of terrorist methods from 1946 onwards. Arendt's remarks thus purposefully create a wrong impression. The use of "terrorism" is especially important in Arendt's distinction between totalitarianism and previous forms of tyranny. Another important difference is that in totalitarian regimes, there is a pervasive sense of seeing everything in terms of all-or-nothing, or us-against-them. In 1948 she described the Jewish populations in both Palestine and the United States as similarly entrapped within their black-or-white view of the world. She describes as them as "essentially in agreement" on the following idea: that "the moment has now come to get everything or nothing, victory or death".

To make more explicit the totalitarian image of Israel, she often compared the nascent state with the ancient Greek city-state Sparta. The use of this imagery was not uncommon among critics of Zionism. Nor was it uncommon among Germans trained in the philosophical tradition to be using symbols from Ancient Greece. Could Arendt not tell the difference between a democratic republic and a Sparta? More than it exhibits an alarming relapse into demagoguery, it is evidence of a faulty political scientist.

Arendt accused the Zionist movement of being elitist, completely detached from the East European Jewish "masses". It is ironic that Arendt does so, because in her *"Origins of Totalitarianism"*, she does the exact same thing. In *"Origins of Totalitarianism"* the East European Jews are completely absent. Jews are all portrayed as rich, bourgeois, western European bankers, financiers, and courtiers.

A good illustration of such a self-satisfied Jew would be the founding father of the Zionist movement, Theodore Herzl, whom Arendt describes as being a Jewish "parvenu", one "who must climb by fraud into a society, a rank, a class, not theirs by birthright". This category was contrasted with the Jewish "pariah". Both "parvenu" and "pariah" were the types of Jews that came out of the Jewish Emancipation. The "pariah" on the other hand, was epitomized by the Jewish French anarchist journalist Bernard Lazare. The "pariah" was a revolutionary fighting for the liberation of his people while fighting for the emancipation of humanity in general.

Arendt emphasized that between the two types was an unbridgeable gulf. One was "universalist" in his worldview, the other a "particularist". Arendt obviously identified more with the "pariah" than with the "parvenu". She abhorred the Herzl-ian Zionist model. She believed that under Herzl, Zionism betrayed its "revolutionary" destiny. In its stead, she offered her own Zionist model, a "Lazare-ian" one. She explained that whilst for Lazare, "the territorial question was secondary". Lazare sought "real comrades-in-arms, whom he hoped to find among all the oppressed groups of contemporary Europe". A Lazare-ian Zionism meant "[organizing] the Jewish people in order to negotiate on the basis of a great revolutionary movement". Arendt believed that since Lazare quit the Zionist Organization in 1899, "no official Zionist leader dared to side with the revolutionary forces in Europe" (As Walter Laqueur rightly asks: What "great revolutionary movement"? What "revolutionary forces"?)

Arendt saw Zionism as instituted on two lies. The first was anti-Semitism, which Arendt saw as more of a Zionist

obsession than a real problem. It was only an excuse, and its existence was overstated by Herzl in order to force a false sense of collective consciousness on the Jewish people. She saw Herzl as being unreasonably obsessed, even though by Herzl's own time "the anti-Semites he had in view were hardly extant anymore – or if they were, they no longer determined anti-Semitic politics". Arendt claimed that the Zionist belief that "all Gentiles are anti-Semitic, and everybody and everything is against the Jews" is no more than "plain racist chauvinism", and "does not differ from other master race theories".

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The second lie concerns the origins of the Jewish people. Arendt expressed opinions that have become commonplace in our time, that the Jews were an essentially European people. Any other claims were, to her, absurd. "Among all the misconceptions harbored by the Zionist movement because it had been influenced so strongly by anti-Semitism, this false notion of the non-European character of the Jews has had probably the most far-reaching and the worst consequences. […] Indeed, the attempts were numerous to interpret Jewish history as the history of an Asiatic people that had been driven by misfortune into a foreign comity of nations and culture wherein, regarded as the eternal stranger, it could never feel at home". By secluding themselves, the Jews had broken "the necessary solidarity of European peoples". Yet an astute observer of human affairs as Arendt would surely have noticed that there was no such solidarity. In fact, a few years earlier, the "European peoples" went to war, proving how much solidarity they felt with one another. Was Arendt blaming the Jews for that?

Arendt's casting of the Jews as a European people may have had to do with her own personal discomfort, as noted earlier. But it is unfortunate that Arendt let her personal feelings get in the way of proper scholarship. She even did so with her reports on the Eichmann Trial, where it seems that her distaste for the Israelis pushed her towards extreme misrepresentations of what had happened during the Holocaust.

The resulting book, *"Eichmann in Jerusalem",* raised two important claims. The first is regarding the role of the Judenräte, the Jews that were selected by the Nazis to serve as "local leaders". Rather than focus on the real perpetrators of the genocide, Arendt insisted that were it not for these Jewish leaders, the Nazis would not have been able to carry out their plan with such efficiency. But why dedicate so much of her thesis to this question? What does this have to do with Eichmann's guilt? Was she suggesting the Jews were responsible for their own extermination?

Arendt seems to have come to Israel with the intention of exonerating Eichmann, and putting the Israeli establishment on trial. This leads to her second claim, which was more "philosophical". Arendt claimed that Eichmann was no more than a simple bureaucrat who carefully filled the orders he was given, and was therefore undeserving of the Israeli characterization of him as a monster. It appears that for Arendt, the true criminals were the Jewish community leaders and the Zionists. If it were not for them, Eichmann could not have executed his plans with such effectiveness. Thus Arendt's rendition of the Holocaust led to a sort of "role-reversal". The victims were suddenly the perpetrators, and the perpetrators were the victims.

But Eichmann was not "banal" at all. Eichmann's greatest crime, the murder of tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews, was committed in direct disobedience of his commander – Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS. This fact alone shows that Eichmann was fully aware of what he was doing, and was not merely obeying orders. This episode happened during the last days of the Thousand Year Reich, when evidence of the Jews' annihilation had to be hidden away. Eichmann ignored the directive, and averted the resources to committing more atrocities. As Israeli historian Elchanan Yekira points out, this fact is missing from Arendt's reports.

As can be gathered, it thus becomes very problematic for Israelis to look up to Arendt as a spiritual leader at this time of crisis. Unsurprisingly, the majority of the people involved in publishing her works in Israel consider themselves to belong to the intellectual current known as "post-Zionism", which openly avows a commitment to the "dismantling" of Israel.

Known generally for its critique of the Jewish national project, post-Zionism emerged in the 1980's and 1990's as a result of national and international political developments, as well as the rise of other "post-national" ideologies in other parts of the world. Post-nationalist ideologies support values that are considered "universalistic" in nature. They seek to undermine the nation-state as the fundamental political unit of

sovereignty and the international order. In the name of "freedom from repression" and "multiculturalism", post-nationalists strive towards the construction of a new world order based on international, non-governmental organizations, that will be free from the tyranny and national chauvinism supposedly espoused by the current nation-state system. Post-nationalists' empathy is often to be found with minorities or "small nations", against larger, well-established states.

Post-Zionists accepted the tenets of post-nationalism and applied them to the Middle East conflict. The basis of their ideological struggle is not the establishment of an independent Palestinian State, but rather the dismantlement of the existing one in the name of "universalist" principles. Unlike other post-national ideologies, post-Zionism boasts openly of a combative dogma intended to destroy the State of Israel as it now exists. Uri Ram, a sociologist at Ben-Gurion University in Israel, largely recognized as one of post-Zionism's founding fathers, defined post-Zionism as a "political-cultural project [that entails] an ideal and political struggle to change the Israeli collectivist identity". And *à la guerre comme à la guerre*, post-Zionists have resorted to the use of "weapons". One such weapon is the "enlisting" of the Holocaust in the name of Palestinian rights. Post-Zionism sees the Palestinian struggle for independence as part of the general Third World Awakening during the mid-twentieth century. The only reason Palestinian statehood did not come about was because of the Holocaust, which disrupted the natural decolonization process. Post-Zionists therefore continuously belittle the importance of the Holocaust. In addition, post-Zionists "imported" into Israel the "imagined communities" discourse made fashionable in the last few decades. They claim that there was no Jewish People as such, and therefore the historical connection to the Land of Israel is a mere imperialistic excuse. Undoubtedly, the original 19th century Zionist Movement shared many traits in common with other European national movements of the era. But to say that the Jewish People did not exist beforehand? Centuries of anti-Semitic propaganda will easily refute such a claim. The very etymology of "Jew" – one from Judea – should prompt some reflection. For centuries the Semitic origin of the Jews was not doubted. Narratives claiming the European origins of Jews only emerged within the past century, by anti-Zionists such as Arthur Koestler, Hannah Arendt, and recently Israeli historian Shlomo Zand. One however must note the irony of how within a hundred years, anti-Semitic discourse changed from the battle-cry "Jews go back to Palestine!" to "Jews get out of Palestine!"

Thus it is easy to see why in an intellectual battle such as this, one of the post-Zionists' weapon of choice in recent years is Hannah Arendt. They must see in her an early forerunner of many of their own claims. In Arendt's book on Eichmann, the shift of focus from the Nazi genocide to Jewish accountability serves exactly the purpose of belittling the Holocaust. In Arendt's claims about the Jews' European origins they find justification for claiming that Jews are an "imagined community". In Arendt's "universalist" ethic, post-Zionists find support for their own anarchistic ideology. But above all, her hostility to Zionism made Arendt a welcome member of the club, regardless of the real merit of her opinions. An evaluation of those opinions, however, is clearly necessary, especially by Israelis.

Naturally, the publication of Arendt's writings in Hebrew is not a problem in itself. Diversity of opinion is welcome. The problem is that in Israel there have been very few voices who have taken up challenging Arendt's opinions. This is the mark of a crisis, of a democracy that is unable to defend itself. And it is unfortunate, because as far as Arendt is concerned, there is plenty to criticize. Apart from her bizarre suggestion that the Jews and Arabs emulate the Soviet Union, we must ask ourselves why her ideas about Zionism fare any better than the ones that were adopted in practice. The State of Israel has existed now for nearly seven decades, and it managed to turn a nation of refugees into a member of the family of nations (admittedly, a family that has not always been keen on accepting her). Despite all the woes – and there have been plentiful – one would be pressed to find someone claiming that the lot of the Jews had actually worsened in the past century. Some may claim that Jewish sovereignty could only be achieved whilst suppressing others' national aspirations. Perhaps. But one should also ask, why are the Jews any less deserving of a state than any other group?

To combat the current crisis, perhaps it would be better to turn away from the "universalist" discourse, and return to the original texts that inspired the Jews to end the two thousand years exile. "Universalism" may not necessarily bring about the unmitigated blessing that its supporters claim for it. And this should be an argument taken up not merely with post-Zionists, but in our discussion of Arendt herself.

To prove this point, let us look once again at Arendt's proposal to adopt a Zionism based on the ideas of Bernard Lazare, rather than Theodore Herzl's. To the latter there exists a monument in the shape of a state that has consistently defended its people from experiencing another Holocaust. To the former there was erected a public square in Paris in 2005. And in such a light, in essence, is how we should view Arendt's remarks. Cp