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### September 30, 2012: Yes, You Can Be a Nonreligious, Nonzionist Jew, But What is the Point?

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Title: Yes, You Can Be a Nonreligious, Nonzionist Jew, But What is the Point?

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9/30/2012—Judith Butler has written *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*. I have not read it, but I did see Shaul Magid's [review](#) of it in Religion Dispatches (9/27). Here is Magid's core description:

"Parting Ways is Butler's attempt to construct a Jewish narrative that coheres with her philosophical and political sensibilities as well as her allegiance to her Jewish heritage and lineage. As a Jew for whom religious practice and the Jewish textual tradition do not constitute her Jewish core, hers is a secular narrative of Jewishness outside the orbit of Zionism. ...

Butler's alternative is a complex philosophical one, thinking with a disparate group of intellectuals who wrote as Jews but not directly about Jewishness at a time when Zionism still shared space with other forms of secular Jewish identity. Her figures are Emmanuel Levinas, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt and Primo Levi. She includes Edward Said and Mahmoud Darwish as Palestinian voices that contribute to the concept of Diaspora and offer an alternative narrative of oppression that they share with the Jews—although ironically theirs is formed at the hands of Israel. Said and Darwish are present here for a reason—Butler's whole point is to show the extent to which Jewish values are Jewish only to the extent that they extend beyond Jews or Judaism. And the persecution of the Jews was wrong only if it is also wrong for those who live under Jewish power."

Now, the critique of Zionism could always be accomplished by a religious Jew. The point of Judaism is to keep the commandments of God in order to live a life of holiness that serves as a blessing to all the world, perhaps as a, or the, model for human life. One needs other Jews in community to do this, but there is no intrinsic need for a Jewish majority or a political entity that will support this vision. All Jews are engaged in God's project and in that sense, but not necessarily any other, the people of Israel must live in solidarity.

Once the religious aspect of this project is lost, Zionism attains a greater potency. Now, Judaism is a sort of storehouse of values developed historically that must be worked out in social and political forms. Now, it becomes understandable that one needs to build a specifically Jewish society.

Butler wishes to contest this. For her, the truth of Judaism is essentially diasporic. Judaism was formed in exile by the rabbis of Babylon and remains a universalist project. For Butler, Zionism is, perhaps inherently, or maybe just the particular policies of the State of Israel, particular and limited. In that sense, Zionism is not a healthy expression of the best of Judaism.

I don't enter into this debate. But I would say that I am a good example of the likely outcome of a project like Butler's. I was in her shoes—a Nonzionist, nonreligious Jew—and my response was to give up Jewish identity entirely. Why limit oneself to the Jewish tradition if the point of life is to express the best of humane, universal values? Of course, one answer to that is that in the end Judaism and all its particular expressions of universalism will disappear. But surely those values have to be lived out by people who believe in them.

Judaism can exist as a religion. It can exist as a society. But Judaism cannot exist over time as a philosophical system or secular, cultural expression within a larger whole. Judaism at that point has given over what it has to give and must disappear and be absorbed into a larger human whole. I don't mean to suggest that this future is "good" only that it seems to me inevitable. Butler is a Jew and I am not. But her descendants are not likely to be Jewish, any more than mine are.