

Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt and the Paradox of “Non-Nationalist” Nationalism

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It is an unfortunate, albeit not entirely coincidental, twist of 20th-century Jewish intellectual and political history that Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt are remembered as antagonists. This adversarial image, no doubt justified by their rather acrimonious public exchange over Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in 1963,¹ is so deeply imprinted in the public mind that it has come to obscure a much more complex 30-odd-year relationship² and the significant areas of agreement upon which it rested. For many years, however, Scholem and Arendt shared not only a close friend in Walter Benjamin,³ but were fundamentally in agreement on a wide range of subjects, many of which concerned politics.⁴

One such common position emerged around their opposition to the idea of Jewish sovereignty, which defined Scholem's involvement in the *Brit Shalom* in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and was a cause Arendt passionately embraced a decade later. The grounds for Arendt's opposition can be easily gleaned from the historical analysis of the “Jewish Question” she puts forth in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (OT). This analysis explains Arendt's enduring concern, shared by Scholem, with the alignment of Zionist and imperialist interests in Palestine prior to the founding of Israel. In this sense, Arendt's position as elaborated in OT and the ideological line of *Brit Shalom* are mutually illuminating. Both represent an attempt to articulate an anti-imperialist position based on a normative vision of Zionism, i.e., on a vision of what Zionism should be (rather than what it was in reality).

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¹For the exchange, see Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah* (JP), pp. 240–251.

²Scholem first met Arendt in Berlin in 1932. See *Walter Benjamin – Gershom Scholem, The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn, p. 191. They stopped corresponding shortly after the *Eichmann* exchange.

³Much of the Scholem–Arendt correspondence is devoted to the Benjamin *Nachlass*. See Gershom Scholem, *Briefe I 1914–1948* and *Briefe II 1948–1970*, ed. Itta Shedlezky, as well as the Scholem–Arendt correspondence in the Scholem Archives, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, no. 4–1599.

⁴See David Suchoff, “Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt, and the Scandal of Jewish Particularity,” in *The Germanic Review*, pp. 57–76. As David Suchoff rightly points out, “As everyone knows, family quarrels are the most bitter kind of fight. What underlies the fierce contention of opposition in them, sometimes expressed in the paradoxes and dialectic of spurned affection, is often a fundamental agreement. . . . The break between Arendt and Scholem masked [such] an underlying agreement. . . . For what connects Scholem's thought to Arendt's is their common confrontation with the German-Jewish dilemma.”

Before attempting to reconstruct this position, though, a few preliminary remarks are in order about Scholem's role in the Brit Shalom. The Brit Shalom, in Aharon Kedar's words "an intellectual circle active in Mandatory Palestine from 1925–1933," was devoted to the idea of Jewish-Arab coexistence in Palestine.⁵ While sharing this common goal, however, not all of its members spoke with one voice. In fact, important disagreements separated not only those members that had immigrated to Palestine before the First World War from those who had come later (Scholem, for example, arrived in 1923)⁶, but also defined the distinct public personas of Scholem, Hugo Bergman⁷, Hans Kohn⁸, Robert Weltsch⁹ and Ernst Simon,¹⁰ all of whom were prominent members. While this group may have constituted the so-called "radical circle"¹¹ in Brit Shalom, it would indeed be deeply misleading to ignore the fundamental philosophical, and ultimately also ideological, differences that separated them, as some recent scholarship has done.¹²

Nevertheless, what defined the ideology of Brit Shalom as a group was clearly its emphasis on the importance of Jewish-Arab cooperation and joint institution building in Palestine. Whatever the internal disagreements, this was a goal all members shared. In effect, much like Arendt would later, the "radical group" in particular regarded Jewish-Arab cooperation as an alternative to the European model of national sovereignty, which they thought had irrevocably compromised itself through the collusion with imperialism and therefore bore a substantial part of the blame for World War I. Scholem, originally one of the founding figures of the Brit Shalom,¹³ emerged, according to Bergman, as somewhat of a leader of the "radical wing"¹⁴ after 1929, when its agenda predominated in the Association.¹⁵

For Brit Shalom, as for Arendt, sovereignty, nationalism and imperialism were essentially different facets of the same phenomenon and therefore impossible to separate from each other. As Arendt suggests in OT, the opposition to imperialism

⁵See Aharon Kedar, "Brit Shalom" in *The Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 18 (1981), (Winter), pp. 55–85.

⁶See Susan Lee Hattis, *The Bi-National Idea in Palestine in Mandatory Times*, p. 40.

⁷Bergman, born in Prague, was originally director of the National Library of Hebrew University, then University Rector in the 1930s (1935–1938) and subsequently Professor of Philosophy.

⁸Kohn, also born in Prague, served as an officer in the Austrian army during World War I. He immigrated to Palestine in 1925 and worked for Keren Hayesod until 1934, when, disenchanted with the Zionist project there, he left for the United States, where he became an important historian of nationalism.

⁹Weltsch, also born in Prague, was the Editor in Chief of the *Jüdische Rundschau*, the organ of German Zionism.

¹⁰Simon, born in Berlin, was Professor of Education at Hebrew University.

¹¹See Shalom Ratzabi, *Between Zionism and Judaism: The Radical Circle in Brit Shalom, 1925–1933*.

¹²See Ratzabi, *Between Zionism and Judaism*. I believe Ratzabi overstates the case for the influence both Ahad Haam and Buber had on Scholem by failing to distinguish between Scholem's arguments for joining the Brit Shalom (many of which had a strong connection to Scholem's scholarship, which Ratzabi does not consider) and those of the former Bar Kochba group, i.e. Bergman, Kohn and Weltsch. Moreover, even within the Bar Kochba group the positions were considerably more differentiated than Ratzabi allows for.

¹³See Arthur Ruppin *Diary* entry of April 26, 1925 cited in Hattis, *The Bi-National Idea*: "In the afternoon, Professor Horowitz [a well-known Orientalist from Frankfurt am Main] . . . came to my home and discussed the Arab problem with me. Present were Scholem, Thon, Shprinzak, Bergman and a few others . . ." p. 40.

¹⁴See Hugo Bergman, *Tagebücher und Briefe*, Letter to Robert Weltsch (September 19, 1929): "Den Brith Schalom fand ich in sehr bewegter Tätigkeit vor. Der aktivste ist Scholem, der ganz Politiker geworden ist und noch extremer in seinen Anschauungen, als er früher war," p. 289. See also Letter to Robert Weltsch (September 25, 1929): "Der Brith Schalom ist überaus aktiv, wie er noch nie war. Die Seele der Aktivität ist Scholem, der in dieser Beziehung ganz verwandelt ist. Er hat natürlich seine bekannten Nachteile, aber er ist andererseits energisch und mutig, offen und unverbraucht, und das sind jetzt sehr wichtige Qualitäten. Ausserdem hat er viel Zeit, da er seit Wochen seine Studien nicht mehr angerührt hat," p. 291.

¹⁵See Hattis, p. 41.