

ligations. But that exchange has stayed with me for over a decade now. Who was in that room, Jews or scholars? Jewish scholars? Are the identities truly or wholly compatible, or must one give way to the other in specific contexts?

This tension has by no means gone unremarked within Jewish Studies. Shaye Cohen and Edward Greenstein, for instance, insisted over a decade ago that “while Jewish scholarship has become a full partner in humanistic studies, it also remains part of Judaism,” and asked pointedly: How does one, writing as both a Jew and a scholar, engage in dispassionate scholarship, practice “the hermeneutics of suspicion,” and also “teach Judaism to the next generation”?

But is teaching Judaism to the next generation really one of the legitimate tasks of Jewish Studies professors working in the academy? I would argue that it is not. Jewish communities are, of course, inhabited by individuals whose task it is to teach Judaism to the next generation and thereby help secure group continuity and survival. They are called rabbis and Jewish educators. Rabbis and teachers within the organized Jewish community may at times express skepticism or suspicion about aspects of Jewish history and culture, but this is not their primary task. Scholars, in contrast, owe their intellectual allegiance to the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” to the critical, at times antagonistic, interrogation of everything related to Jews and Judaism. This does not mean that securing Jewish collective identity and continuity cannot be an unintended consequence of Jewish Studies. It cannot, however, be articulated as a necessary or positive component of the discipline without compromising the traditional principles of modern scholarship, and thereby calling into serious question

the intellectual standing of Jewish Studies.

I want to be clear, however, that I am not arguing that a scholar’s personal relationship to his or her own Jewish identity should not necessarily play a role as an impetus to scholarly work. It may very well be that the tension between personal engagement and professional disengagement is a key driving force in Jewish intellectual production, one that is impossible but also undesirable even to attempt to disentangle. Indeed, in Jewish Studies it is axiomatic: that the discipline functions in some way to allow individuals to work out or through issues of identity, of relationships to community, people, nation. For some, though by no means all, academic Jewish Studies provides a surrogate sort of Judaism, with libraries and seminar rooms taking the place of the synagogue and yeshiva. But there is a crucial difference between granting this personal impetus that is, perhaps inherently, a part of the enterprise, and allowing, even encouraging, the goal or ideal of Jewish collective identity and continuity to be a proscriptive element within Jewish Studies. When this happens, when Jewish scholars are expected to be handmaidens of the organized Jewish community, then some of the most difficult and uncomfortable — but also, perhaps, some of the most interesting and important — questions and issues may not be raised.

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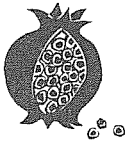
Losing What Would Be? A Response to Mitchell Hart

Jonathan Schorsch

Mitchell Hart (whom I know well) raises a seemingly simple yet vastly complex question in his piece: Are those Jews engaged in Jewish Studies “Jews or scholars? Jewish scholars?” I would argue that the answer inevita-

bly is “both,” “all,” and even more.

Like Hart, I will begin with the particular and move to the general. It strikes me that there is something naïve or disingenuous about the question he posed in Jerusalem and the way he casts



the responses it generated. Imagine that this had been a gathering of scholars studying the Lakota Sioux, the Penan people of Borneo, or the Irish. Imagine that some of those present came from these groups themselves. The question “why should this people survive, what would be lost if it didn’t” would be greeted with no less justifiable outrage. The detachment for which Hart wishes — a clinical understanding that civilizations or populations rise and fall, come and go — would be seen as a Hegelian sniffing at the importance and meaning of a culture, of a way of life, for the people living it. What would be lost with its disappearance is everything those interested in maintaining that culture love about it. The destruction of cultures and languages over the past centuries is hardly theoretical. Certainly some of the drain has been voluntary, certainly cultures undergo change, certainly many of these people still live full lives (disregarding the pain and suffering of both victims and survivors). But the loss and its cost fill me with sadness; for many this sadness is, quite literally, unspeakable.

In some sense, however, Hart’s anecdote is not what he is actually talking about. The emotional ties many feel for their group’s particular way of life, as multiplicitous, fragmented, or even self-contradictory as they might be, brings us right to the heart of the matter. Part of the problem is that Hart bases his ideas on untenable assumptions about the nature of the self, the academy, and intellectual work. His is a triumphal history of progress from lamentable primitive theocentricity and communalism to liberated, detached, disembodied individual ratiocination. Hart’s model of “traditional modern scholarship” harkens to notions of “science” as a value-free realm, whose practitioners operate unencumbered by such things as gender, race, or class — notions that have been thoroughly questioned and deflated of late. Hart relegates religious belief and communal allegiance to the sphere of the personal, the emotional; their seepage into the realm of intellectual thought threatens the alleged purity of this inner

sanctum. To worry that Jewish scholars act as “handmaidens” of the “organized Jewish community” is terminology right out of medieval theological denigrations of philosophy. In Hart’s desacralized Enlightenment tyranny, intellect seemingly *must* be positioned *against* faith and community.

It is probable, however, that those who cry for freedom to ask antagonistic questions “of everything related to Jews and Judaism” use Jewish Studies no less as a forum in which to replay primal scenes of identity formation. The “hermeneutics of suspicion,” if wielded equitably, should also question denial of belief, fear of and flight from communal meaning-making, unquestioned

faith in the powers, and good of the self, of freedom for its own sake. Is Emanuel Levinas’s work less scholarly because of its overt ethical and theological bent, but the work of Gershom Scholem more scholarly because of its thorough ambivalence (to say the least) regarding the claims of its object? If only from a disciplinary or methodological perspective, “Jewish Studies” embraces so many different

modes that, thankfully, there is (and should be) room enough for vastly contrasting approaches. Those scholars who care about Jewish identity and continuity cannot be dismissed as pawns of religious nationalist ideology, nor can they be seen as the only ones “importing” their personal stance. Ultimately, I fully agree with Hart that academic debate must guarantee open, critical interrogation of everything. Yet this questioning must come with a certain amount of respect, even sympathy, for the groups, people, and cultures being interrogated. Daniel Boyarin’s ideal of “generous critique” appeals to me as a wise (and pragmatic) path. If there is no love, on whatever level, for one’s subject or field, I fail to see how one can be a good scholar. Further, though I define it differently than Hart for rhetorical purposes, I have little use for “dispassionate” scholarship; I want passion and engagement even in my sociology.

Hart’s opening anecdote does not serve to elu-

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cidate his very legitimate concerns. The fact is that even in the “holy” land of Israel (citing Hart’s gratuitous yet revealing allusion) all sorts of critical scholarship on a wide variety of topics regularly sees the light of publication. Yisrael Yuval can produce an essay acknowledging ritual killings of children by their Jewish parents during the Crusades in a most traditional mainstream journal of Jewish history, and “post-Zionists” tear down the idols of Israeli innocence. Closer to home, unorthodox interpretations have few problems reaching the market (Ammiel Alcalay, Daniel Boyarin, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, Norman Finkelstein, Naomi Seidman). If all these elicit immense controversy, I take it as a sign of the health of the field. But if Hart yearns for an agonistic intellectual arena in which anything goes, he cannot also feign incomprehension of the political and religious pressures determining the context in which such struggles occur.

Though I am not aware of any pervasive expectation that Jewish Studies scholars “teach Judaism to the next generation,” it is true that various communal interests push for an avowedly and often narrowly defined identity-oriented stance. What I find surprising is that Hart doesn’t name them: the excessive dependence of Jewish studies programs on lay patrons, many fundamentally conservative, and the subtle self-censorship implanted by financially driven community relations; a preoccupation with the Holocaust and the acceptance (encouragement?) of monies from donors for numerous chairs and professorships on the subject; intolerant pro-Is-

rael sentiment forcing the marginalization if not ousting of dissenting voices; the woeful ignorance of students about things Jewish. If institutional limits such as these are what Hart means to contest, I share his concerns. Although dissent needs to be delivered sympathetically, it must also find institutional toleration and protection, particularly after “9/11.” Hart’s formulation, though, valorizes in reaction a detachment he perhaps does not fully intend — one that seems to reserve no space for scholarly engagement that deviates from his own “free-floating” disinterest.

While Kohelet warned against the proliferation of books, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav’s main disciple, Rabbi Natan, wrote that scholarly dispute serves as a necessary *tikkun*, for dispute gives birth to better, stronger, and more plentiful Torah scholarship. The continued flow of Torah’s living waters depends, then, on dispute, which R. Natan understood as a sublating reiteration of the biblical *mei meriva*, the waters of conflict. May we continue to struggle for wisdom and understanding, always sweetening bitter waters in the process.

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A Reply to Jonathan Schorsch

Mitchell Hart

While I appreciate Jonathan Schorsch’s engagement with my piece, he takes for granted precisely what I want to interrogate — the assumption that there is a normative manner to a Jewish scholar’s approach to Judaism and Jewry, and that this manner *ought to be conditioned* by “love,” “respect,” and an abiding concern for the group’s continuity and survival. How does this affect the range of questions we ask? Schorsch responded, unknowingly, to a condensed version of a talk I gave at a conference on boundaries in Jewish Studies. Some of his criticisms might have been

less severe, or absent, if he had seen my original paper. I fully agree with him that Jewish Studies can boast a long and healthy tradition of self-criticism. I also agree with him that Israeli scholars have been particularly good at this sort of critique. They have been far less timid than their American counterparts in radically challenging orthodoxies. My anecdote, set in Jerusalem, was not meant to imply anything about Israeli scholars. Rather, I understood the episode to be an “American” phenomenon; if it illuminated anything, then, it would be about American-Jewish identity, fears, and anxieties.