

Daniel Boyarin, *The No-State Solution: A Jewish Manifesto* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), pp. 200.

Where Do We Go From Here? The Time of Daniel Boyarin's Manifesto

by Arie M. Dubnov

Daniel Boyarin is the Bruce Springsteen of Jewish studies. Like the rock icon, this New Jersey boy brings to the stage a powerful voice and razor-sharp texts. While his career skyrocketed in the 1990s, he's still going strong and shows no signs of slowing down. However, unlike "The Boss" Bruce, celebrated for his all-American, working-class hero persona and praise of traditional family values, Boyarin is the rebellious and iconoclastic *enfant terrible*. Just as he would not hide his yarmulke, he does not conceal his anti-Zionist positions, his taste for expensive (kosher) wines, his attraction to feminist and queer theory, or the pleasure he takes in kicking the symbols of bourgeois respectability in the behind. I had the privilege of seeing him in action about a year ago at a research workshop held in Berlin, and the performance did not disappoint: "Jewish studies have lost their validity and become a field that does nothing beyond encouraging Jewish phalluses from going into Jewish vaginas!" the clever troublemaker declared to his audience, and one could see how much he relishes watching the German hosts turn pale and move nervously in their seats.

No wonder that he was the anchor of Joseph Cedar's movie *Footnote* (2011), a delightful parody on academic life, which opens with a scene mocking three young Talmudic scholars who argue passionately about Boyarin while chewing with equal vigor the appetizers served at an award ceremony:

- "Oh, oh! You're not talking like a scholar now. You're talking like an ideologue!"
- "What are you talking about? The guy [spends the day] sitting on manuscripts, he reads the texts closely. That's what Boyarin does all the time. What he's actually trying to do is derive anthropology from hermeneutics."
- "All his articles are the same..."

- “You missed the whole point of the article! Look, it's just...”
- “Boyarin’s whole corpus...”
- “Historically, Orthodox Christianity, all the discourse on gender and sexuality is metaphorical. It’s not concrete.”
- “But what do ‘body techniques’ have to do with interpretive practices!?”
- “It’s like this new story of defeminizing the Jewish man in the Talmudic period.”
- “Yes, but that’s an anti-colonialist argument!”
- “What are you talking about?”
- “What am I talking about?! What are *you* talking about!”
- “What he’s trying to do is defeminize the Jewish man in the Talmudic period, basically saying that this sissy man, compared to the virile and strong Roman man, with his iron helmet and nailed boots...”
- “Basically, he’s arguing that what Zionism did was turn the Jewish man from a feminine man to a macho man. And that's the destruction of Jewish history!”¹

It would be difficult to find any other living Jewish Studies academic, let alone a Talmudic scholar, whose densely theoretical writings invite such a wonderful blend of academic lingo and unbridled aggression. Boyarin, in short, is one of those *penseur provocateurs* with whom one can agree or disagree but one cannot ignore.

Boyarin brings this flamboyant persona to his latest book, *The No-State Solution: A Jewish Manifesto*. As its title suggests, the book does not pretend it is a traditional academic monograph. Published prior to the outbreak of the current Gaza war, the text summarizes long years of thought and is rich in insights and provocations. The book’s dual helix consists of two intertwined core arguments. The first argument is based on a fundamental rejection of the very use of the term “Judaism” (or *Judentum* in German). According to Boyarin, this category assumes that Judaism should be understood as a “religion” (*religio*) with features such as dogma (a religious doctrine whose dissenter is considered a “heretic”), a closed and agreed canon of sacred texts, and some equivalent to a “church” institution, as the one we find in Catholic and especially Protestant Christianity. This criticism may sound familiar to those following Boyarin’s writings from

¹ Joseph Cedar (director), *He`Arat Shulayim/ Footnote*. 107 mins. Israel: United King Films, 2011, opening scene.

previous stages and rehashes the move of his 2019 book, prepared for the Rutgers Series Keywords in Jewish Studies. The very category of “religion,” according to this critical approach, should be taken with a grain of salt since it is, essentially, a modern and Eurocentric construct. Imposing this category on non-Christian groups, including the Jews, helped the Europeans to put them into their neat classifications but damaged our ability to grasp the true meaning of Jewish life. Thinking through the prism of “religion,” in other words, proves to be a Procrustean bed: it violently hurts and restricts the range of motion of those subject to it. In the book at hand, Boyarin attempts one step further as he embarks on a journey to find an alternative to the concept of “Judaism.” During this journey, he tries to clarify and distill a broader and more inclusive notion of “Jewishness” (*Jüdischkeit* in German, *Yiddishkayt* in modern English transliteration) or *Jewissance*—a neologism Boyarin also introduced before, in his *Unheroic Conduct* (1997), echoing Jacques Lacan’s *jouissance* (an intense form of enjoyment, that may also include suffering) that aims to capture the joy rooted in an authentic Jewish experience over many generations.

The book’s second core argument follows this point: instead of talking about “religion” or an abstract notion of “fear of heaven,” we should rehabilitate the term “nation” (*am*, אֵם) in its biblical sense and put it back in circulation. This term, Boyarin explains, includes collective features such as “shared [historical] narratives of origins and trials and tribulations, shared practices (including, but not limited to, “cultic” practices), shared languages,” and even “shared territory and power over that territory, a territory just for ‘us’ ” (p. x). The restitution of notions like “people” and “nation” may seem surprising and almost inconceivable given Boyarin’s public image as a fierce critic of Jewish nationalism. After many years in which it seemed that the very name Boyarin was synonymous with someone who had freed himself from the burden of belonging to a political community, suddenly we have a Boyarin 2.0 who is making new sounds, drawn to the unifying experience, as a person seeking a source of strength that comes after deconstruction. Dear Professor Boyarin: Have you turned into a Zionist in your old age? And if so, why do you so adamantly reject the idea of a Jewish state?

Evidently, Boyarin’s manifesto seeks to answer these questions, but I am not entirely sure he does so in a convincing manner. To his credit, he does score many points in his critique against the tendency to understand Judaism through “Protestant” lenses—a critical intervention that should be included

in the mandatory reading list for any student of Jewish history or religious studies. Indeed, it is worth reminding readers that in both Hebrew and Arabic, the word *'umma* (עַמָּה in Hebrew, أُمَّة in Arabic)—which could be translated as either “nation,” “people,” or “community” (Boyarin translates it as “people/peoplehood,” p. 94)—signifies a collective group of individuals bound together by common cultural, linguistic, religious, or historical ties, which is a far better category than “religion.” This assertion has far-reaching implications that extend beyond the scholarly debates in our current age of hyper-populism and increasingly authoritarian political culture. It is an important attempt to free Jewish identity from the iron grip of the Jewish state, which seeks to monopolize all discussions on Jewish identity, and an invitation to rethink diasporic Jewish nationalism. Not less significant, this is a desperate, perhaps futile, effort to offer an alternative vocabulary to North American Jews who feel increasingly alienated from the ADL (the Anti-Defamation League) or the Jewish Federations’ official line and to free Jewish studies from conservative groups like the Tikvah Fund, which conflates criticism of Israeli policy with anti-Semitism, and haste to mark both as attacks on Western civilization’s core values. Also to his credit, Boyarin is not aiming his arrows only at the conservative right but also directs his critique at leftist scholars who impose ahistorical concepts like ‘church,’ ‘religion,’ and ‘faith’ to define the Jews. Indeed, this line of criticism allows Boyarin also to offer a powerful rebuttal of Shlomo Sand’s dogmatic anti-Zionist tracts, which fail to grasp that Jews are not a church but a national group (pp. 9-11).

However, it’s important to note that Boyarin isn’t the sole voice emphasizing the issues with this categorization. Leora Batnitzky’s aptly titled *How Judaism Became a Religion* made a similar argument, delving into debates over whether Judaism can align with the Protestant notion of religion as a private belief without reaching the same political conclusions.² Among the historians, Kerstin von der Krone provided a careful and highly detailed reconstruction of the emergence of state-sponsored German Jewish religious instruction “textbooks,” which included catechisms—a staple in Christian education, which had no significant Jewish equivalent until the 19th century—showing how the German state’s interest in Jewish education, driven by reforms and prejudices that viewed Judaism as morally inferior, catalyzed the writing of such books, that were modeled on

² Leora Faye Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Christian precedents.³ Nor is the problematic of “*religio*” and the search for “orthodoxia” (literally, the “correct belief”), that is the assumption that the faith community should be defined based on adherence to accepted creeds or doctrines, necessarily unique to Jewishness turning into “Judaism:” Richard W. Bulliet, a historian of early Islamic societies, had long ago insisted that “*orthopraxy*”—a term that highlights the correct conduct and practice of a member of an Islamic community, such as adhering to prescribed rituals, behaviors, and ethical practices—is more significant historically than “*orthodoxy*,” a category that focuses on “correct belief.” Just as Bulliet contends that many Islamic societies were more concerned with correct social and legal practices (*orthopraxy*) than with correct belief (*orthodoxy*), especially in the Ottoman Empire and the Shi'i orthopraxy in Safavid Iran, so we can think of the “corporate nature,” as the Israeli historian Israel Bartal called it, of Jewish communal life in Eastern Europe.⁴ In essence, while liberating ourselves from the “*religio*” lens is crucial and beneficial, this critique is not exclusive to Boyarin. Moreover, it does not inherently align with a specific ideological stance and could support both Zionist and anti-Zionist arguments equally.

The book's major weaknesses become visible when we approach it from the vantage point of Jewish history and historiography, especially one that is informed by the past decades' serious efforts to go beyond Zionist and “Ashkenormative” grand narratives of Jewish history. Jewish history provides a long list of different forms of *Golus* nationalism and diaspora nationalism—i.e. social formation, institutions, and organizations that could be called nationalistic or proto-nationalistic, that denied Jews as a national collective and were committed to maintaining Jewish identity, culture, and community life within the countries where Jews reside, rather than focusing solely on the “return to Zion.” Since 1897, many of these developed out of controversy with Zionism and as an attempt to offer it an ideological alternative. The platform of the Bund movement, which combined Marxism with nationalism (infamously denounced by Georgi Plekhanov, who described its members mockingly as “Zionists who are afraid of seasickness”), and so are the variety of ideas about national autonomism

³ Kerstin von der Krone, “Nineteenth-Century Jewish Catechisms and Manuals: Or What One Should Know About Judaism,” in *Religious Knowledge and Positioning: The Case of Nineteenth-Century Educational Media*, eds. David Käbisch, Kerstin von der Krone and Christian Wiese (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2023), 85-104.

⁴ Richard W Bulliet, *Islam: The View from the Edge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Israel Bartal, “From Corporation to Nation: Jewish Autonomy in Eastern Europe, 1772-1881,” *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 5 (2006): 17-32.

within a multi-national or imperial framework that Simon Dubnow and others developed, inspired by Austro-Marxists thinkers. In the USA as well, a thinker like Simon Rawidowicz, who quarreled with Ben-Gurion and the “negators of the diaspora” and insisted that Jewish existence outside of Israel has a central role in Jewish life, stands in the background of these discussions as well. Equally significant is the French-Tunisian writer and essayist Albert Memmi, who passed away in 2020, who was the first to propose the concept of *Judeity* (in the original French: *judéité*) as a Jewish parallel to the notion of “*négritude*,” developed by Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor, as an attempt to capture the divided consciousness of the African intellectual trying to integrate into France while being asked to “overcome” his dubious origins.⁵

Surprisingly—and alarmingly—Boyarin mentions almost none of these individuals or movements (Césaire and Memmi’s names are mentioned in passing, incidentally, and in different contexts, despite the fact the book includes an entire chapter entitled “Judaïtude/Négritude”), nor the work of his UC Berkeley colleague Erich Gruen, who devoted an entire career to the study of the ways Jews maintained their diasporic collective identity vis-a-vis the Hellenic and Roman cultures (diaspora, after all, is a Greek word). More ironic, the inside cover of the book—a reproduction of a famous image taken from a Bund party poster produced as part of a political campaign—appears not only without any credit or explanation of the historical origin of the illustration but also without any hint that would tell the readers of the strong anti-clerical element if not even abhorrence of theology that were prominent features of the Bund’s ideology and practice (they were, after all, Marxists). The problem is not a lack of credit to predecessors and colleagues but the realization that what we have here is a graphic representation divorced from its original context, or what Jean Baudrillard would simply mark as simulacra and simulation: an image or semblance of something that can be artificially represented in a form that is either indistinguishable from reality or so distorted that the original meaning is lost.⁶

⁵ The famous essay appeared in English translation long ago: Albert Memmi, “Negritude and Judeity,” *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 3, no. 2 (1968): 4-12.

⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).



Fig. 1: The original Bund party poster, 1918, reproduced in Boyarin's book. The title in Yiddish reads, "Dort vo mir leben — dort iz unzer land!" (Wherever we live -- that's our homeland). Public Domain.

Even more uncomfortable is the feeling that what we read here is a New Yorkcentric tract. It is masquerading as inclusive while being in praxis exclusive and rather narrow-minded in the way it defines “real Jews” with their “forms of life” and “Lebensformen.” Injecting himself into the story, Boyarin reminisces: “When I was a child, my parents spoke a language they called “Jewish”—translating the word “Yiddish” into English—when they didn’t want children to understand. I once asked them if a certain person who worked for them spoke “Christian”; they didn’t understand the question” (p. 112). If the Zionist poet laureate Hayim Nachman Bialik fled from the stifling atmosphere of the yeshiva study room, Boyarin, not hiding his sentimentality, longs to return to it and call upon us to mimic the mannerisms of the “poor yeshiva *bokher*,” emersed in learning with his “*Gemoro loshn* (Talmud lingo)” (p. 116). Not surprisingly, towards Hebrew Boyarin is ambivalent at best. Though he does not reject it categorically, he bitterly rejects the Zionist commitment to it and considers its transformation into a vernacular as a kind of historical accident. What to do with the millions of Jews who consider Hebrew today to be their mother tongue? Boyarin does not provide us with an answer. So who are Boyarin’s “real Jews”? The sociological category can be easily teased out: there are

basically third-generation descendants of East European immigrants to the New World, who are mostly mono-lingual American patriots today speaking English enriched with Yiddish expressions and idioms. The parents and grandparents of these American Ashkenazi Jews experienced upward mobility, witnessed the removal of discriminatory practices and greater integration, and are squarely middle-class. Thus, for them, the mannerisms of the poor yeshiva *bokher*, are weird, unattainable, and undesirable. The education they received, together with the mores and values of their social class, committed them to anti-racism and made them feel uncomfortable about over-eagerness to defend the ethnic tribe, yet they still have a strong feeling of bond and “ties of kinship” that produced “the imagined community of the diasporic nation” (p. 56). Boyarin declares that he loathes the term identity politics (pp. 14-67) and indeed, he offers no politics, just a form of identity. And this identity, he admits, should be *performed*. How? Through “modes of walking, body language, telling stories, singing songs, as well as the study of Talmud, practicing the rituals of the holidays, eating this food and not that” (p. 58). In short, “real Jews” are the people Boyarin sees in the mirror. Those Jews who do not walk the walk and talk the talk are, apparently, not part of the group.

At the end of the day, this is a failed manifesto because it fails itself. The late Israeli essayist Dan Tsalka joked once that philosophers are those who spread smoke in the room and then complain that they cannot see anything. Boyarin is not a philosopher, but there is something about his book that brings to mind Tsalka’s witticism. Choosing to call his work a manifesto—a text setting guiding principles and calling for action—Boyarin permits himself to revisit and simplify his earlier densely theoretical works and speak the language of the “common man,” but it is evident that he is having difficulty doing so. The role of a manifesto is to be a tool for political mobilization, not narcissistic meditations or nostalgia for a bygone world. But Boyarin offers no plan for action and does not tell us where we should go from here and how. That is because Boyarin runs away from the political. He declares that he wants “[n]o more Federations; Councils; Leadership Committees”—i.e. no more institutions representing the Jews collectively, operating in the political sphere—“Just Jews, singing, dancing, speaking, and writing in Hebrew, Yiddish, Judezmo, learning the Talmud in all sorts of ways, fighting together for justice for Palestinians and Black Lives” (p. 127). This is a childish retreat into an inner citadel. The *Jewissance* he offers us is a boutique café. Into this imagined and nostalgic

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space of *Yiddishkeit*, too many *actual* Jews – the Jewish nationalist who is also a conservative statist, the yeshiva scholar who, unlike the so-called “woke generation” is not so progressive when it comes to LBGBTQ+ rights, the Jewish supremacist inspired by Meir Kahane and drawn to authoritarian, anti-democratic and racist ideas—are not allowed to enter. A product of the age and the society in which it was produced, Boyarin’s slogan book reflects the deeply polarized American culture of our times without much scrutiny and challenge. He flushed the ugly politics down the toilet in the name of a colorful and joyous “Jewish identity” he constructed in his imagination. Yet paradoxically, the more we disregard politics, the more it insists on bursting out of the gutter and filling the room.

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