

## A CONVERSATION WITH DANIEL BOYARIN

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On March 10, 2014, Daniel Boyarin, the Hermann P. and Sophia Taubman Professor of Talmudic Culture at University of California, Berkeley, gave the Pearl and Jack Mandel Lecture in Jewish Studies at the University of Toronto. The lecture, titled “Martyrology as Dialogue: Talmudic and Midrashic Connections with ‘Other Judaisms,’” was presented by the *University of Toronto Journal of Jewish Thought* and sponsored by the Centre for Jewish Studies. During his visit, Boyarin answered questions in a special seminar with Yaniv Feller, Jessica L. Radin and Amy Marie Fisher, past members of the journal’s editorial board.

For decades, Boyarin has been a leading figure on subjects as diverse as sexuality and gender in Judaism, the “parting of ways” between Judaism and Christianity in antiquity, and Zionism. Some of his best-known works are *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (2002), *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (2004), *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (2013), and *A Travelling Homeland: The Babylonian Talmud as Diaspora* (2015).

In the following interview, Boyarin briefly reflects on the value of dialogue in Jewish and Muslim interactions, the place of Israel in diasporic Jewish life and culture, and the role of academic Jewish Studies departments within the larger Jewish community.

**Jessica L. Radin: To what degree should a historical reading of Christian-Jewish dialogue affect our understanding of contemporary interfaith relations, given that there are new issues playing a far larger role in creating dialogue?**

Daniel Boyarin: First of all, let me say that I don’t like the concept of dialogue at all: dialogue implies set and settled identities. It implies institutional structures and commitments, and it implies pre-set conditions. It assumes: we’ll only talk to you if you acknowledge x, y, or z concept. But I would hope that dialogue could affect conversation in the sense that a different perception of who we are could conceivably lead to different ways of talking to each other and about each other. This could also lead to a lessened sense of binary opposition.

I do hope that my work will lead in some ways to different places for conversation: for instance, acknowledging that the Trinity and incarnation are not some crazy, pagan influences on Christianity, but rather that they lie at the deepest roots of the Jewish heart of the Jesus movement. They can shift our perception of Jews who acknowledge Jesus—who we call Christians—and Jews who do not acknowledge Jesus. A lot of times Christians ask

me, “Why did the Jews reject Jesus?” and I reply, “Who do you think accepted Jesus?” And I also say, “You know, if you know anything about Jews you know that we don’t all agree about anything, so what would you expect?”

**JLR: I’m interested in the distinction that you draw between dialogue and conversation, or between rhetoric and dialectic, particularly in your recent work on Thucydides and Plato. In light of these distinctions, would you characterize the conversations that we see between rabbis in the Talmud as dialogue or debate?**

DB: As dialogue yes, but not as dialogical. This is the important distinction that I make in *Socrates and The Fat Rabbis* (2009). The dialogical can be found more often in debate, or, in the Talmud, in the interaction between genres within the text. The interaction between genres in the Talmud is a kind of satire, which does not mean the same thing as satire in modernity. Satire comes from the Latin word *satura*. *Satura* was a dish with many different ingredients mixed and cooked together. So if, in that sense, we think of the whole Talmud as a *satura*—a cholent—it’s about different voices being put into a dialogical relationship. It is the *machloket* (debate) of the *sugiah* (Talmudic discourse) that I love. I used to see Talmudic dialectics in contrast to each other, but lately I see them as much more closely aligned in the excluding of any real conversation about foundations themselves. For example, we ask questions such as: “is it permitted or forbidden to eat an egg that was laid on *yuntif* (holiday)?” But what about the fundamental question: does it make sense to ask such a question at all?

**JLR: In both Jewish and Islamic philosophy, there is a lot of emphasis on the nature of the conversations that are taking place, particularly on the question of whether communication is rhetorical or dialectical and the implications of that distinction from political and pedagogical perspectives. What insights can our understanding of communication offer to Jewish-Muslim conversations?**

DB: I think, in general, a stronger focus on the way that Arab Jews and Arab Muslims have worked together in a common philosophical enterprise could certainly open up a space for different kinds of conversations between Jews and Muslims today. Not interfaith dialogue, but rather a recognition that for hundreds of years Islam and Judaism were not in a situation in which there *needed* to be dialogue; the two groups were already deeply engaged in shared conversations. The more that we foreground that there is no ontological, ahistorical or even age-old binary opposition between something called Judaism and something called Islam, the more we will be empowered and able to have different kinds of conversations with each other. We don’t need to have an idealized account of a golden age in order to remember that there was a time before “Jews” and “Arabs,” when the two groups were not in binary opposition. This awareness could facilitate our recognition and respect for a conversation that goes back at least a thousand years.

**Amy Marie Fisher:** I'm particularly concerned about the line between the "Jewish" and the "non-Jewish." I work in what is uncomfortably called "Second Temple Judaism" and I think a lot about what else to call it.

**DB:** Well I certainly wouldn't call it Judaism!

**AMF:** So what would you call it?

**DB:** The notion that there is something called "religion," separable analytically from everything else that a group of people did and thought before the Enlightenment, strikes me as absurd. I would never talk of Second Temple Judaism, but I wouldn't talk about Rabbinic Judaism either. I would talk about Jewish culture or Judean culture.

**AMF:** I like the term *judeos*.

**DB:** Right. "Judean" runs into problems because it sounds like it is referring to Judea, which implies that it is centered on the geographical region. It should not be restricted in that way. And "Jewish" raises other problems. "Judaic" might work in some ways. I think we can write whole books about the Jews without ever using the word religion or Judaism, and I'm trying to show that in a new book, *Imagine No Religion* (2016). I think that the notion of religion arises not just in the Enlightenment. It arises in a very specific political conditions, in conditions of empire when there is either a claim from the bottom or an attempt from the top to incorporate groups into the body politic who don't worship as the majority do. And the minute that such a necessity or desire goes away, religion goes away as well. So Jews only get a "religion" as long as there is a desire to incorporate them into a polity.

**JLR:** After thousands of years of Jews very obviously being on the borders, there is a place that claims to be the end of Jewish exile. Do you think there is validity to the claim that many in Israel make to its centrality? Can you elaborate on the effects you think those claims have on Jews and Jewish culture?

**DB:** I'm bitterly, bitterly opposed to the claim that Israel *is* the Jewish people, or that it represents the Jewish people. When I see in Israeli papers—right-wing Israeli papers to be sure, but still—the claim that [Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu is the leader of the Jewish people I am appalled to the point of vomiting. This is the consequence of a certain kind of Zionism—Ben-Gurion Zionism. There were Labour Zionists, even Labour Zionist *forces*, opposed to the forming of the state. Nationalism and stateism are not necessarily coeval. There is a version of nationalism that allows for the possibility of different nations sharing space—a trans-state nation—and I think that more robust development of such a model would bode well not just for the Jews but also other nations, such as the Kurds.

**JLR: In light of these claims to Israel's centrality for twenty-first century Jews, what is the role of diaspora Jews?**

DB: To continue to develop robust Jewish cultures that include Israel and Israelis as part of a diasporic world Jewish culture; by writing in Hebrew and Yiddish; by developing powerful secularist Jewish cultures and a world in which yeshivas and secularism are in some kind of—tense, perhaps, but still vibrant—living interaction; and by studying Talmud and teaching Talmud. I have this crazy notion that the Talmud is the key to Jewish cultural existence.

**AMF: So are you suggesting that the Talmud is the centre of Jewish diaspora, and Israel and Israelis are part of this diaspora?**

DB: Absolutely! I argue exactly that in *A Travelling Homeland*. I think one of the most hopeful signs in Jewish life is the *daf yomi* movement, which has transversed the borders of the yeshiva world.<sup>1</sup> There are all kinds of *daf yomi* taking place in Orthodox and non-Orthodox circles, including a young woman in England who does the *daf yomi* by drawing a picture of the day's *daf* (page). I take it as a very good sign.

**JLR: One of the great benefits of academic centres devoted to Jewish Studies is that they're not about Jews studying Judaism but about people studying Jews and Judaism. They're not parochial. Can you comment on what this means for the future of Jewish Studies and its professors?**

DB: In many North American academic settings, centres for Jewish Studies have become the academic arm of Jewish communities, partly because of donor relations. I've even heard the question: what is the centre for Jewish Studies doing to make Jewish students feel good on campus? To see academic Jewish Studies even being called upon to make Jews comfortable seems like a disaster for Jewish life and Jewish Studies. But, at some centres, the livelihoods of the Jewish Studies professoriate are not dependent on pleasing the more-or-less official forces of the Jewish people. I am deeply attracted to the notion that Jewish Studies professors are a species of court jester. That professors have, by and large, been free of direct interference from the Jewish community means that we have been able to develop the uncomfortable and critical voices that need to be attended to. Plus, we have tenure.

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<sup>1</sup> *Daf yomi* means "page of the day"; Jews around the world read one page of Talmud in a cycle that covers 2,711 pages and lasts more than seven years.