Three responses to Keith Kahn-Harris’s new book Uncivil War: The Israel Conflict in the Jewish Community

What’s an editor to do when his/her own book comes out? How do you commission a review of your own book?

That’s the dilemma that I’ve faced in this edition of the Jewish Quarterly. My book Uncivil War: The Israel Conflict in the Jewish Community, which came out in March 2014, deals with issues that this magazine has long been interested in. In a nutshell, the book argues that the British Jewish community, like other diaspora communities, is becoming increasingly divided over the question of how to relate to Israel. Further, these divisions are leading to conflicts that endanger Jewish community and peoplehood. My book argues that the Jewish community needs to promote civility in discussions over Israel, nurtured by practices of dialogue. I myself have tried to do this through convening private dinners at my home with Jewish leaders and opinion formers, in which differences can be discussed in a convivial environment.

I’ve thought long and hard on how to balance my need to promote the book with my responsibilities as editor of this issue of the JQ. I certainly didn’t want to commission a “tame” reviewer. So what I’ve done is not to commission a review at all. Instead, I’ve commissioned three think pieces that take the arguments the book makes as their starting point. I asked them to reflect on the question of civility - what it is, what it should be and how necessary it might be in the context of Jewish conflicts over Israel.

All three writers have responded in very different ways. They demonstrate that my book is not the last word on the subject, but part of a much wider debate on Israel and on civility itself.

— Keith Kahn Harris
Jonathan Cummings

Why should it be that Jewish communities find talking about Israel in a meaningful and civil way increasingly difficult? Support for Israel, once perhaps the single most unifying factor in diaspora Jewish life, is fast becoming a primary cause of disagreement and disagreeable behavior. Where Israel was once elevated to the status of a civil religion to which diaspora Jews enthusiastically subscribed, it is now easier and easier to find examples of conversations about Israel that turn ugly, of relationships that sour, of communities that unravel under the stresses of differences of opinions. This is the Uncivil War at the heart of sociologist Keith Kahn-Harris’ recent book on the conflicts that surface when diaspora Jews discuss Israel.

Whilst outbreaks of incivility are often given great publicity, it is far harder to identify the conversations that never happen for fear of disagreement, although those are perhaps even more worrying. If the results of the Pew Center’s recent survey of American Jewish life apply to other diaspora communities, then it seems that diaspora Jews are already finding it difficult to forge a meaningful relationship with Israel. It will be even harder to do so if we can’t find satisfying ways to talk with each other.

On the face of it, the conversation about Israel amongst Jews most naturally resembles a family discussion, albeit a geographically, ideologically and generationally extended one. Whilst different Jews have adopted radically different world views, there is an underlying sense that the differences between us are, after all, fewer than what we have in common.

Perhaps that’s part of the problem. Paradoxically, deep hatreds seem to flourish not only between those who are most unlike each other, but also between those who are, or at least those who seem to be, most similar. Sigmund Freud even found a term for it: “the narcissism of the small difference”. Freud didn’t turn the world upside down, claiming that minor differences are more prone to creating animosity than major differences. Indeed, he accepted that greater difference leads to even greater hostility. He did, though, suggest that “it is precisely the minor differences in people who are otherwise alike that form the basis of feelings of strangeness and hostility between them”. We amplify the little differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ — however similar we are — in order to reinforce the cohesion of our own group, however small it is.

Doesn’t that sound familiar? Increasingly, the Jewish conversation about Israel is held between apparently distinct groups who adopt a particular position or set of ideas, with Freud’s “strangeness and hostility” between groups in full view. It is an interesting thought experiment to imagine the alternative: discourse amongst people who feel themselves to be part of the same community, and share a set of basic values — support for Israel and a sense of Klal Yisrael, for example — but who are able to disagree on the details in a way that reinforces, rather than frays, their sense of community. For his part, Kahn-Harris urges us not to leave this situation to fester: “too many people are hurt, alienated and abused by the conflict”. But what to do?

In German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer’s fable of the porcupines, a group of animals were huddling together to shelter from the cold. Finding that they were pricking each other with their sharp quills, they moved apart, only to feel the cold again. And so on, back and forth, until they found it best to be a little distance from each other – not too close, and not too far away. Yet, notes Schopenhauer, a prickly character himself, “by this arrangement the mutual need for warmth is only very moderately satisfied”. The human equivalent of the optimal distance found by the porcupines — neither too close and prickly, nor too distant and chilly — “is the code of politeness and fine manners, and those who transgress it are roughly told — in the English phrase — to keep their distance”. In order to avoid each others’ barbs, in other words, we compromise on the intimacy we need for meaningful interactions.

When conversations about Israel turn sour, as they often do, it is easy to blame those who are prickly and disagreeable, and to call for Schopenhauer’s “politeness and fine manners”. But are better manners the only remedy for such cases? On one hand, taking a polite distance from each other can certainly hamper our ability to engage in genuinely satisfying human encounters. We can also set the bar too high, straitjacketing debate in formal rules and excluding those whose ideas we find disagreeable, and to call for Schopenhauer’s “politeness and fine manners”. But are better manners the only criteria for engaging in conversation about Israel, we may be selling ourselves short. Engaging in meaningful dialogue may demand much more of us than just being polite — sharing our uncertainties as well as our conclusions, being willing to talk with people whose perspectives may appear to be different to our own, and undertaking the difficult task of seeking answers together.

Jewish history offers a different approach, acknowledging that meaningful dialogue — “controversy for the sake of heaven”, as the Talmud calls it — must necessarily
Perhaps because it is one of the most intractable of these situations, the theory and practice of recognition and acknowledgement is particularly visible in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The orientation of this work, articulated especially by Jewish critics of Israeli policy, is towards advocacy of Jewish ‘responsibility’ for conflict and suffering there. As Keith Kahn-Harris reminds us in his new book, *Uncivil War: The Israel Conflict in the Jewish Community*, feeling in this area is very intense, and this has knock-on effects on the way Jews treat one another. Accusations of stupidity, betrayal and self-hatred abound, even of Jewish antisemitism, making Israel one of the main fissures within the Jewish community, rather than the unifying force that its supporters — which in one form or another includes most Jews — would like it to be. The complex layering of responses to Israel and specifically to the occupation has provoked a kind of crisis for many Jews influenced by, and feeding back into, our notions of Jewish ethics, culture and historical legacy, as well as our attachment to and identification with Israel itself. It also provokes a communal crisis: how do we live with others, as we must, when so much dissension is so hurtfully stirred up?

**Relational Ethics and Acknowledgement**

Hurt and abasement figure prominently in the vocabulary of relational ethics, as do, in more hopeful moments, reconciliation and reparation. Presumably this is because personal and communal relationships are so difficult to manage, and are so frequently damaged and damaging. An ethical relationship — which might just be a grander term for what Kahn-Harris calls “civility” — is one that responds to this essential difficulty, trying to find a way around it without sacrificing one’s beliefs but also without losing the impulse towards connectedness. It does not deny that hurt occurs, but raises awareness of harm that is done and asks how to undo it. Kahn-Harris references the philosophical perspective of Lévinas, referring to an ethics based on face-to-face encounters. Lévinas, however, also stresses how appreciation of the *precariousness* of the other is central to ethics, and how we might be tempted to attack the other and must fight that temptation in ourselves. The struggle is *within* each of us; if it were not so, then there would be no ethics at stake — all would be smooth and easy; there would be no temptation that one needs to resist. It is like the religious issue of freedom of choice and evil: what is the virtue of virtue if one cannot choose to do wrong? There would be no ethical stance involved if there were no struggle to be undertaken.

Yet this does not mean that our responses to others must be violent; rather, it shows how the struggle with and against violence is intrinsic to human subjectivity. This is true too of the *injured* response that is core to the way people lash out into ‘incivility’. All of us are liable to
feel injured and are tempted to express that in relation to others with whom we have contact and to whom we might feel connected. When we share a space, whether physical or psychical, we are likely to do harm. Recognition of this tendency to violence, this temptation to destroy everything, leads to recognition of the responsibility one has to struggle against that temptation and to acknowledge what one has done when the struggle fails.

The American-Jewish psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin has worked acknowledgement into both her clinical and her political practice in relation to an ‘acknowledgement project’ in Israel and Palestine that reaches across lines of conflict. Benjamin is a forceful advocate for a mode of taking responsibility through acknowledgement that has direct implications for reconciliation work. She links this with the psychoanalyst’s realisation that, whilst she or he might be the “activator of old traumas, old pain” rather than their instigator, “you acknowledge that you have...bumped into the person’s bruise, and you acknowledge that there is hurt and pain and that you may have responsibility for that, and in doing this, you alleviate a whole level of tension that makes it possible, then, to talk about, to explore”. Taking responsibility for others arises from recognition of their existence as genuine centres of subjectivity, not just as possessing rights but also having the capacity to be hurt.

For those who wish to speak of ‘acknowledgement’ as a Jew in relation to Israel, the stakes are high, opening them up to accusations of Jewish antisemitism, as Kahn-Harris shows. It might be said here that this charge of antisemitism is a crucial silencing device within the Jewish community and that silencing is not only imposed from outside: a good deal of self-censoring goes on, fuelled by anxiety about being marginalised, but also by a genuine dread of hurting those to whom one is close. For some, any criticism of Israel is an anathema, a betrayal of identity and identification. For many others, it is legitimate but immensely painful and always likely to implode when it seems ‘unbalanced’ or unfair. What is it that we are supposed to acknowledge? What damage have I done? For what can I be called into account? What about Jewish suffering and, of course, the victims of Palestinian terror? Who cares for us that we should care for them? What about the blending of anti-Zionism and antisemitism, which even careful, scholarly critics of Israel acknowledge exists? The prominent Jewish philosopher Judith Butler, herself a victim of considerable ‘incivility’, states, “The only way to fight against the equation of the criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism is to clearly and repeatedly, and with strong collective support, show both that the criticism of Israel is just and that all forms of anti-Semitism, along with any other racism, are absolutely illegitimate”.

Butler addresses the dilemma of Jewish identification and self-criticism by uncovering a strand of Jewish tradition that refuses the defensive retreat into the self-justifications provided by even genuine injury. She calls on “Jewish frameworks of social justice”, which she pursues through a series of moves that draw on Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin, proposing that the suffering of the Jews sensitises Jews to the suffering of others. One’s experience of injury does not legitimise injurious behaviour; instead, it places one in the position of empathy. One might however ask a very conventional question about this: does the stance that emphasises taking responsibility also place an unbearable ethical burden on those who have been victimised more than others, perhaps because they have been subjected to systemic or institutional violence?

Whilst this might indeed be a familiar question, dangerously establishing the ground for an opt-out from responsibility (“We have been so badly hurt that recognition and acknowledgement does not apply here; we are the victims of violence so why should we forgive?”), it has practical consequences. It forms exactly the argument adopted by many Jews in their defence of Israel: the hurt we have suffered is such that we cannot be held responsible in the same way as others. For those ranged against this position, it is almost unbearable to hear it expressed, but this does not mean that one can ignore the problem: at what point does my injury and victim position mean that others have to go first in their acknowledgement before I am called on to own up to my own destructive urges?

A Dark Vocabulary

The vocabulary of relational ethics is a dark vocabulary, one that causes strife. It cannot be reduced simply to questions of politeness, as Kahn-Harris notes; ‘civility’ has more at stake than that. It demands renunciation of the previously cultivated victim position that is so often used to warrant incivility and even violence. It is a vocabulary of responsibility, including responsibility for hurts that one has not perpetrated oneself but has witnessed. It is a vocabulary of acknowledgement, if acknowledgement means taking on the responsibility of stating one’s own injurious behaviour, one’s own destructive intent. In relation to the damage done, this is a dark vocabulary that stirs up wounds and that faces people with existential anxiety. If we cannot take refuge in our victimhood, then we have to face both the...
37 suffering we have undergone and the suffering we cause. This prises open identities closed around historical self-justification and stresses the dependence of each of us on the others amongst whom we live. Incivility, the building of walls, the shutting down of communication, the separation of communities are all modes of defence, explicitly and intentionally; they are also acts of violence that explicitly and again intentionally rule the other out of the domain of the human, to whom damage can be done. [This piece is heavily adapted from Stephen Frosh’s article ‘The Relational Ethics of Conflict and Identity’, published in Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society, Volume 16, 2011]

Professor Stephen Frosh has, since 2003 has been Pro-Vice-Master of Birkbeck College, first with responsibility for Learning and Teaching and then for Research. His academic interests are in the applications of psychoanalysis to social issues; gender, culture and ‘race’; and psychosocial studies. His latest book is ‘Hauntings: Psychoanalysis and Ghostly Transmissions’ (2013).

David Hirsh

There is a war of words between the diverse majority of the Jewish community and its tiny but influential anti-Zionist fringe. Many Jews are worried that hostility to Israel is sometimes antisemitic, sometimes mirrors antisemitic forms and sometimes brings with it antisemitic exclusions or ways of thinking. The anti-Zionists tend to dismiss this worry about antisemitism as an illegitimate attempt to silence criticism of Israel. Of course we may civilly disagree about what is antisemitic and what isn’t; and we may argue, present evidence and discuss. But the space for rational discussion is often closed off in advance by an accusation of bad faith. It isn’t said that Jews are mistaken when they think something is antisemitic; it is said that they’ve invented it, disgracefully, for short-term, tribal, or nationalistic reasons; that they are crying wolf.

This struggle happens in public and it is influential upon wider non-Jewish civil society. Blanket denial of antisemitism becomes an enabler of antisemitic discourse, boycotts and ways of thinking. Anti-Zionist Jews play a key role in licensing, leading and encouraging movements which single out Israel as a unique evil on the planet.

A South African trade unionist declares that he intends to make life hell for ‘Zionists’, Zionists are like Hitler and they should leave South Africa on an El Al plane. The Jewish anti-Zionist fringe insists that this is only to be understood as a vulgar way of carrying on a debate about Israel and Palestine. Anti-Zionism tends to treat talk of antisemitism as a dirty tactic in the Israel/Palestine debate.

People get angry and upset because they are afraid that the actions of a small minority of Jews are influential in bringing antisemitism down on the heads of their fellow Jews while others get equally angry and upset because they are convinced that their fellow Jews are trying to silence criticism of Israel with a dishonest accusation of antisemitism.

There is no nice way to accuse someone of being soft on antisemitism; there is no nice way to accuse someone of raising the issue of antisemitism in bad faith. It is the content of the claims, not their form, which is hurtful. Re-framing the issue to make us all right will not do.

The Livingstone Formulation, the response to an accusation of antisemitism which declares that the accuser speaks in bad faith, makes debate impossible. If you say that somebody who raises the issue of antisemitism is just a liar then there is no discussion which can bring us towards agreement. It silences Jewish fears and portrays them as disgraceful tactics.

Because Nazism had already been defeated when we were formed politically, it was easy for us all to recognise it as the enemy. Because colonialism and racism had been discredited, we could all understand dockers who marched with Enoch Powell and racist Afrikaners as throwbacks to a disappearing age. But caricature might have been the price we paid for unanimity.

Whereas we thought of Nazism as representing the culmination of antisemitism, it was actually an exceptional form. We were tempted to ‘other’ antisemitism, to construct it as being something which could only exist outside of our own, civilised sphere. But in fact, antisemitism had always existed very much within our own spheres: within Europe, within the left, within radical philosophy, even amongst Jews.

Antisemitism has often taken political forms, it has attracted ‘people like us’, it has not always been easy to recognise; it has melded with criticism of capitalism and banking, nationalism, modernity and imperialism.

There have always been some Jews who have succumbed to its logic. Nazism itself grew partly out of radical anti-hegemonic political traditions and was attractive to some within ‘our world’. But it was comfortable, afterwards, for us to imagine antisemitism only as appearing with a silly moustache and a fascist uniform; and as being permanently discredited.

The defeat of colonialism was not so straightforward either. It was defeated by nationalist movements which had a tendency to succumb to the most ethnically-based forms of nationalism and they tended to create regimes which mirrored some of the worst race-thinking and kleptocracy of the old empires. The Soviet Cold War common sense of a world divided into imperialism and anti-imperialism gave the gloss of the ‘progressive’ to some of the most despotic regimes. The notion of ‘progressiveness’ attached itself to peoples and nations rather than to political movements or to ideas. The violence of this black/white binary is illustrated by the
fate of those who fell between the two camps: Tutsis, Tamils, African Asians, Jews, Armenians, Bosniaks, Tibetans, Kurds.

The colonialists who ran the great cosmopolitan cities of the Middle East were replaced by movements which tended towards ethnic nationalism in Cairo, Alexandria, Baghdad, Beirut, Tehran, Damascus, not only in Jerusalem.

We thought anti-Nazism was enough when we should have understood the complexities of antisemitism and we thought anti-colonialism and anti-racism were enough when we should have made more effort to forge a positive cosmopolitan politics.

Now we find ourselves in a world that we have trouble understanding. Jews are thought of as white and therefore never potential victims of racism: nobody looks like the Nazis so how can there be antisemitism? Israel, the refuge of the un-dead of Europe, is thought of as colonialist or apartheid. Jews, except for those who disavow, are conceived of as ‘Zionists’, which has become another word for racists or oppressors.

The conflict between Jews in the Middle East and their neighbours tends to be mystified into ready-made ways of thinking; either Jews are simply victims of the hostile antisemites around them or Arabs are victims of the Israeli white settler-colonialists. Israelis and Palestinians tend to attain a symbolic importance which is out of proportion to their actual weight in the world. They become an empty vessel into which everybody pours their own issues, a template by which people recognise themselves, a language in which they discuss their own angst.

There is an antisemitic threat in our world. Antisemitism is objective and external, recognisable through a set of clearly established characteristics. The French comedian Dieudonné makes Holocaust denial funny as he constructs a worldview where anti-imperialist thought and the right to Zeig Heil are curtailed by overwhelming Zionist power. Mainstream British and American academic organisations host campaigns to exclude Israelis, and only Israelis, from the global academic community. Open antisemitism is commonplace amongst Islamist and Arab nationalist movements which are considered by some to be part of the global left. The idea that Zionism is the key form of racism on the planet is common in radical circles. The assumption that Jews who fight against antisemitism are actually fighting for Jewish privilege lurks below the surface of much public debate. The possibility that the Israel lobby is responsible for war is taken seriously. The impulse to boycott Israel is thought to be respectable; anybody who says it is antisemitic is thought to be vulgar and tribal.

There is a tiny minority of Jews which leads the movement to exclude Israelis from the global community, which insists that Israel is uniquely and essentially racist, which educates people to recognise anybody who worries about antisemitism as dishonest apologists for Zionism. Hardly any Jews are anti-Zionist, but many anti-Zionists are Jews.

This minority often mobilises its Jewish identity, speaking loudly ‘as a Jew’. In doing so, it seeks to erode and undermine the influence of ordinary Jews in the name of an authentic, radical, diasporic and ethical Judaism.

Jews who worry about antisemitism are written off as tribal and self-interested; they are constructed as ‘Zionists’ and hence not as antiracists, intellectuals or legitimate members of the left. This hostile, external construction of Jews is in sharp contrast to the eager self-definition of the ‘as-a-Jew’ critics, who parade their Jewishness in order to discredit, in the eyes of the onlooking world, the fears of their fellow Jews.

The ‘as a Jew’ preface is directed at non-Jews. It tempts non-Jews to suspend their own political judgment as to what is, and what is not, antisemitic. The force of the ‘as a Jew’ preface is to bear witness against the other Jews. It is based on the assumption that being Jewish gives you some kind of privileged insight into what is antisemitic and what is not: the claim to authority through identity substitutes for civil, rational debate. Anti-Zionist Jews do not simply make their arguments and adduce evidence; they mobilise their Jewishness to give themselves influence. They pose as courageous dissidents who stand up against the fearsome threat of mainstream Zionist power.

Ironically, this positioning by the tiny minority tends to set the boundaries of civil discourse in such a way as to exclude and silence the legitimate concerns of the majority. It characterises antisemitism as a right-wing issue and it teaches antiracists to recognise talk of antisemitism as an indicator of racist apologetics.

We need to agree that antisemitism is serious and that it is real. It is not only a threat to Jews but it is also a threat to the labour movement, to intellectual culture and to wider society. Of course we need then to be able to present and discuss arguments and evidence as to what is antisemitic and what isn’t. How we define it and how we recognise it are rightfully up for democratic discussion. The phenomenon which most definitely closes off the possibility of civilised discourse is the claim that Jews raise the issue of antisemitism, knowing that they’re lying, in order to stifle free speech and criticism.

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