

RH2 2021

Some of us here are old enough to remember letter writing. Whether it was pen pals at school or writing love letters, people used to correspond thoughtfully and deliberately in writing. Two of the most famous Jewish pen pals were Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem, who began their correspondence immediately before the Shoah.

Arendt and Scholem were two of the foremost Jewish thinkers of the 20th century and, thanks to their shared relationship with literary and cultural critic Walter Benjamin, started a regular correspondence. While the letters covered many topics, it was their discourse on Israel and Zionism that are the most contentious and the most famous. Arendt represented both the voice of the left and the voice of the diaspora, having fled Germany for France and later the United States, while Scholem represented the voice of the Israeli and the right, having made Aliyah from Germany in 1923.

While their correspondence lasted decades, I want to focus on two specific moments in their conversation. In 1946, Hannah Arendt published an article titled “Zionism Reconsidered” in the *Menorah Journal*. In this piece, Arendt offered a biting critique of what she called “the tragic abdication of political leadership by the vanguard of the Jewish people”—that is, the Jews of Palestine. Zionism, she argued, entangled the Jews in a new nationalism, just when the dangers of nationalism had been made clear to all. The quest for a Jewish state could only end in permanent hostility between Jews and Arabs; and because a Jewish state could not survive without the protection of a great power, Jews would end up in the very position of dependency that Zionism was meant to cure. Finally, a Jewish state would do nothing to solve the problems of Jews in the diaspora, including anti-Semitism.

Gershom Scholem was shocked to discover that the two of them had such divergent views in relation to the Jewish state. This struggle on matters related to Israel would continue 17 years later after Arendt published her work, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Scholem publicly and hastily rejected the book’s arguments. But at the heart of his reaction lay something even more intuitive

and emotional: a shocked rejection of Arendt's tone, which he saw as unacceptably ironic, high-handed, and detached. "There is something in the Jewish language that is completely indefinable, yet fully concrete—what the Jews call *ahavath Israel*, or love for the Jewish people," he wrote. "With you, my dear Hannah, as with so many intellectuals coming from the German left, there is no trace of it."

Hannah Arendt was greatly troubled by this notion. Assuming that love of Israel means universal support was contrary to her worldview. She thought that people should be loyal to the good and the true, and to the friends they choose; they should not be loyal to identities or groups, which always leads to the abdication of individual thought. And it would be shortly after this that their 25-year letter writing and shared work would come to an end.

It is fascinating that even though this correspondence took place more than half a century ago, the arguments being made about what constitutes *ahavat yisrael*, a love for the land and people of Israel persist to this very day. The voices of the left, in particular in the diaspora, mirror Arendt's concerns for the inherent challenges of a Jewish state. And the voices of Zionists and the voices of our brothers and sisters in Israel can be heard in Scholem's understanding of *ahavat yisrael* and the essential requirement to love and support the people and land of Israel. Many of us could easily see ourselves expressing these same thoughts today as these great thinkers did more than 50 years ago.

While so much of this conversation is the same, the piece of this account that is remarkable, that we probably could not imagine today, is the fact that two people who saw the world so differently still saw the value of their continued correspondence. The two of them knew that it was highly unlikely that either would ever be able to convince the other of their rightness, and yet, there was still value in writing to each other and sharing their thoughts.

It is certainly not news to anyone to hear that their rabbi is concerned about the echo chambers in which we live. Our tradition reminds us that foundational to Jewish life is dialogue with people with whom we disagree, not in order to convince, but in order to better

understand ourselves and others. Pirkei Avot teaches that *Machloket*, debate, is good, as long as it is for the sake of heaven. The example of this presented in the text is Hillel and Shammai, not the schools of Hillel and Shammai who fought over everything, but the people, who debated each other, learned from each other, and benefited from each other's presence in their lives, but only publicly disputed the others conclusion 3 times. When I lived in Atlanta, I was part of a program called Reclaiming the Center, which brought centrist Jews and Christians together for dialogue. And while challenging conversations would come and were desired as part of the program, we began by learning about each other, opening the doors to conversation, but more importantly, realizing the shared humanity and dignity of all of the participants.

Now, I don't think I can bring back letter writing, but I do believe that there is still immense benefit in creating spaces where multiple perspectives are not only presented, but have opportunity to be in conversation with each other. There are fewer and fewer places where people with such differences of opinion still coexist, and there is less and less interest in creating those sorts of spaces because it is so hard to do. I believe this shul can be, and to some degree, already is, one of those places. We have congregants with opinions about Israel that could not be more divergent. We have people within our community for whom egalitarianism in worship is new and unfamiliar and still others for whom it is foundational. In a world where we post articles we've never read on Facebook because we agree with the headline, places still need to exist where people are willing to do the work, reading and talking through complicated matters. Where people engage in dialogue with hearts open rather than guns blazing.

In the coming year, we are working to enrich our offerings in relation to Israel as well as planning to create small groups where dialogue on difficult topics with people with differing perspectives are all participating.

And then we, inspired by Arendt and Scholem, instead of distancing ourselves from people with whom we disagree, can choose to draw them closer, engaging with them in dialogue. In those

moments, understanding ourselves better and maybe even understanding them better as well.
And while we may never change our minds, we can see that Eilu VeEilu Divrei Elohim Chayim,
both mine and yours, are both the words of the living God.