

## Israeli Culture

## To Be or Not to Be Jewish, Lesbian, Feminist

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Jan 6, 2004



Prof. Judith Butler, professor of Comparative Literature and Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley, is visiting Israel this week. Butler is an unusual figure in academia. On the one hand, she is a celebrity who has a community of followers and who exudes charisma. Groups of followers sometimes line up for her lectures, as though she were a rock star; and her major influence on feminism at the start of the 21st century is widely noted. On the other hand, many persons outside of feminist academia have never heard of her; nor have they come across her ideas, or been influenced by them.

Also, some detractors criticize her prose style, complaining that it is heavily laden with post-modernist jargon. In fact, in 1998, the academic journal *Philosophy and Literature* awarded her first place in its World's Worst Writing competition, an amusing critique of inaccessible academic prose. It can't really be said that Butler has altered her writing style since then.

Just as Butler, 47, has earned deep-rooted admiration and respect, she has also stirred opposition, both from the conservative ranks in American academia, and also in some feminist circles. Conservatives fret about the influence she exerts on students, with respect to issues of lesbian rights

and feminism; concurrently, Butler has been engaged in serious ideological battles with notable American feminists such as Catharine Mackinnon and Martha Nussbaum.

## Zionism and gender

During a discussion on Sunday at a Jerusalem hotel, just a few steps away from the walls of the Old City, Butler radiated charismatic energy. It was clear that she is accustomed to confronting the mainstream - that might be the source of her vitality.

A political position which has motivated her of late, she says, is that of a Jewish woman who opposes Israel's conquest in the territories. Though she will speak tomorrow in Tel Aviv on gender, the field in which she has made her mark, what has brought her to Israel is her criticism of Zionism.

"I grew up in a very Zionist family, in Cleveland," she recalls. "My mother, Lois, was active in the American Jewish Committee. I always respected her activity, but I always understood that there is a reality for Israelis, and more so for Palestinians, that has not been addressed. Layers of reality in which Israelis and Palestinians live have never been addressed in synagogues of the Reform movement, within which I was educated. They didn't speak about violence and oppression and humiliation. I developed my own criticism of Israel, and also at the same time a strong Jewish identity."

In Berkeley, California, Butler says, she found "a progressive Jewish community which has enabled me to study Jewish philosophy in depth, and also deal with politics of social justice." She says that she attends synagogue services regularly ("I understand that many leftists in Israel don't

get anywhere near religious institutions; with me, it goes together well"); and she sends her nine year old son to Hebrew school.

Supporting her critique of Zionism, Butler turns to Jewish philosophers and figures such as Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas and Judah Magnes. "There was Jewish thinking, even within Zionism, that suggested an alternative to basing the state on religion," she says. "I hadn't known that." Also important in her thinking was the discovery that "there are Jewish philosophers who uphold that as Jews, the ethical activity that is most important for us is relating to the other."

The lecture which Butler gave yesterday in Jerusalem's Notre Dame Hotel, at a conference sponsored by the Faculty for Israeli-Palestinian Peace (FIPP), was a continuation of an argument waged last year in American and British newspapers between Butler and Harvard University President Lawrence Summers regarding forms of activity against Israel sponsored by leftist academics in America. Summers criticized academics such as Butler who signed petitions and organized symposia and demonstrations against Israel. Among other charges, the Harvard University president maintained that these critics are "serious, thinking people who are promoting activities that are anti-Semitic in their effect, if not their intent."

Butler responded in length (in a piece published by The London Review of Books), and challenged what she regarded as Summers' basic assumptions. She argued that Summers' attempt to defend Israel against all criticism is founded upon an anti-Semitic proposition similar to that which compels academic institutions in the U.S. and Europe to boycott Israelis and Jews. That is, the claim that Israel cannot be criticized since such criticism is informed by anti-

Semitism is based upon the anti-Semitic propositions that Jews are one cluster, that they can only be victims, and that Israel and Jews are one and the same thing. Butler maintained that criticism and the pursuit of a just, democratic society are Jewish values; and so her criticism of Israel is not tainted by anti-Semitism. "It would become the responsibility of all of us to change the conditions of reception so that the public might begin to distinguish between criticism of Israel, and a hatred of Jews," she argues.

### Understanding the other

Butler will speak tomorrow at 18:00 at Tel Aviv University's Bar-Shira Auditorium on her field of expertise, and fame - gender. She will speak to a large group of curious listeners and also admirers - most will be admirers, mainly feminists, many of whom (it can be assumed) will be lesbians. She will speak as a woman, lesbian and feminist who levels criticism of these very categories - woman, lesbian, feminist.

Butler explains her politics of disclaiming: "First of all," she says, "I do claim to be a lesbian and a Jew." Before she disclaims such categories, she explains, "I identify, as a lesbian and as a Jewish woman. I have other identities too. I am a strange philosopher, a short person, and [I am] aging," she says, smiling. "That is, I definitely claim that I am a lesbian and a Jew, but it would be wrong to claim that to be lesbian and Jewish is all that I am. It would also be wrong to assume that my lesbian [identity] or Jewishness describes my worldview. I don't think that lesbian sexuality is specific and completely different than heterosexual sexuality. One cannot say that there is no overlap between homosexual and heterosexual sexuality. There are straight practices used by homosexuals."

As Butler sees it, identity is not a clearly defined and coherent entity. She challenges listeners to stop and ask themselves what it means to be "Jewish," to be a "woman," or to "come out of the closet."

"I'm not interested in drawing boundaries around myself," Butler explained this week. "I'm against separatism of any kind."

That sentiment is at the core of Butler's vision of feminism, and it is also the source of her dissent from the traditionalist core of American feminists. At the start of her most popular book, *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler asks, "Who is the subject of feminism?" Does feminism operate on behalf of all women, or in the name of femininity? If feminism represents women and female values, what exactly are those values? Perhaps the defining of such values, and of womanliness, is precisely what perpetuates the balance of power between the sexes in society; and so does feminism harm itself when it perpetuates the category of "women"?

Butler deepens the distinction between sex and gender that is accepted in feminist theory. Being a man and being a woman, it is now universally accepted, are cultural constructs. "Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original," Butler adds. "Masculinity" and

"femininity" are constructed out of imitation and performance, she argues. There is no genuine prototype of a "man" and a "woman" - imitation and performance, not the categories they evoke, are the essence.

Even the fact that women, unlike men, can give birth (typically, Butler's detractors appeal to this biological fact in an attempt to reject her theory) is not an absolute fact which necessitates the fashioning of the female gender, Butler

claims. There are women who cannot give birth, and there are women who do not want to give birth; and there is no reason for supposing that the possibility of giving birth produces a particular type of "woman" category.

After reading Butler, and French feminist thinkers who inform her thinking (including Monique Wittig and Luce Irigaray), it is difficult to continue thinking of sexual and gender identity along traditional lines. There is something very liberating about these ideas; and they exercise a special appeal to people who do not conform readily to conventional categories of masculinity and femininity.

Butler says that she is unsure of the extent to which she has been influential outside of academic circles. "Sometimes I receive letters from people who say that I have helped them. It always pleases me to see that someone has been influenced by my work."

Asked whether she thinks that her work has made readers feel more comfortable with their sexuality, Butler says: "Feeling comfortable - that's an interesting idea but not one that I am familiar with in my life. They say it's a nice thing, to feel comfortable, but I don't know about it....I hope that my writing contributes to maximizing livability. I am worried by the suicides of young homosexuals and transgenders, by young men and women who fear that their sexuality has no place. I would want to be part of a world in which realizing your passion is not only possible but also an integral part of a flourishing life."

Asked about critics who charge that her writing is inaccessible, and therefore fails to influence a wide audience, Butler responds: "With regard to the accessibility of my writing, there is a paradox: they say that it's impossible to read me, but my writings have been translated

into 14 languages, and hundreds of thousands of copies of my books have been sold. That is, they are, for academic works, very popular. Beyond that, I speak in different ways to different audiences; I wrote some articles in popular newspapers after September 11, and about the war in Iraq. It's only my academic writing about gender that is less accessible."

Butler adds: "When it comes to gender, I ask people to think anew about what it means, and about what their gender is. Ordinarily, people think that 'femininity' and 'masculinity' are an inner reality, or an expression of some natural inner reality. They speak about it in an idiom and in concepts that appear self-evident. For this reason, I cannot speak in my everyday language. I want to problematize regular language."

For some critics, this goal is precisely the problem with Butler's politics. Her dissent from categories of identity is so unqualified, they charge, that she ignores real, flesh and blood men and women, the balance of power between them and their needs.

For her part, Butler claims that mainstream American feminism - as led by figures such as Catharine Mackinnon - suffers from a tendency to view women as victims, to ignore cultural differences, and to over-emphasize pornography. This vision of feminism should be contested from within the feminist movement, she says; and an alternative must be provided. Her detractors say that Butler's feminism is abstract and theoretical, and encourages the movement to ignore the material aspects of the feminist struggle - economics, political power, and violence.