

Arendt and Deutscher on heresy and identity

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ABSTRACT This article addresses the constitutive role of heresy in Jewish modernity. Heresy – defined here in terms of assimilation – is commonly considered destructive to Jewish tradition. I, however, examine Hannah Arendt’s works on the model of the Jewish pariah and Isaac Deutscher’s notion of the non-Jewish Jew to identify a model in which heresy gives structure to a new, modern Jewish tradition. In Deutscher, the analysis shows, this tradition of heresy suggests a universal world-view that eventually empties Judaism of any particular content. Arendt, on the other hand, connects the possibility of Jewish particularity in the present with her ideal of the pariah-as-heretic. Heresy reflects neither assimilation nor rejection of Judaism but rather offers a new foundation for Jewish particularity. The argument shows how the heresy of the pariah is also foundational to early formulations of Arendt’s politics of plurality.

IN AN OFT-QUOTED PASSAGE from his celebrated memoir *From Berlin to Jerusalem* (1977) Gershom Scholem famously describes the agnostic atmosphere of his childhood home:

In our home there were only a few perceptible relics of Judaism, such as the use of Jewish idiomatic expressions, which my father avoided and forbade us to use, but which my mother gladly employed, especially when she wanted to make a point. ... The *Kiddush*, the Hebrew Blessing for the Shabbat, was still chanted but only half understood. That did not keep people from using the Shabbat candles to light a cigarette or a cigar afterwards. Since the prohibition on smoking on the Sabbath was one of the most widely known Jewish regulations, there was a deliberate mockery (*bewußte Mokkerei*) in this act.¹

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1. G. Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth* (trans. H. Zohn; New York: Schocken Books, 1980), p. 10.