

# The Politics of Friendship

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At this symposium on politics and music, and on this panel called, after Jacques Derrida's book by the same name, "The Politics of Friendship", it seems appropriate to begin with some words from the philosopher:

I wonder if philosophy, which is also the birth of prose, has not meant the repression of music or song. Philosophy cannot, as such, let the song *resonate*.<sup>1</sup>

There is something about the history of philosophy, in its drive to pin down, define and determine meanings, in its insistence on knowledge (as opposed, perhaps, to experience) that negates, for Derrida, whatever resonates in music.

Indeed, Derrida confessed elsewhere that:

Music is the object of my strongest desire, and yet at the same time it remains completely forbidden. I don't have the competence, I don't have any truly presentable musical culture. Thus, my desire remains completely paralyzed. I am even more afraid of speaking nonsense in this area than in any other.<sup>2</sup>

Feeling much as Derrida did on this subject, I will not endeavour to speak about music here either, although I *may* indicate ways in which political theory, as one form of philosophical expression, can work to repress the multiplicity of voices we find gathered in song.

However, in what follows I plan to revisit some thoughts I sketched together for a recent conference, where I was asked to respond to *Support Structure*, an architectural project co-

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, J. (1995) *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf & others. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 394.

<sup>2</sup> Brunette, P. & Wills, D. (1993) *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 21.

established by London based architects, Celine Condorelli and Gavin Wade.<sup>3</sup> I am no more an expert on architecture than I am on music, so architecture will play a mostly metaphorical role in what will primarily be an attempt to think through the theoretical implications of support structures (that is, temporary structures such as scaffolding), in ways which *ought* to be relevant to today's discussions as well.

Condorelli and Wade suggest that architectural practices (and if we heed Goethe's conception of architecture as "frozen music" then the same might be said of musical practices) may be interpreted as "a form of political imagination"<sup>4</sup>; and they define a support structure as a

form of interface towards the making of place, which does not produce objects but relationships to context.

As I hope will become clear, friendship may present an analogous concept to this structure of support. Indeed, the type of friendship I'm interested in just now concerns a form of political (although not exclusively political) alliance: a friendship that appears, as it were, predetermined – presupposed by historical bonds and ties.

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For around two thousand years Jews have lived in and as a Diaspora, and life in the Diaspora has traditionally been viewed in a rather negative light, most often equated with lack of space, or lack of control over space. Indeed, until fairly recently, the image of uprooted strangers wandering around strange lands, inhabiting temporary abodes rather than permanent settlements, has been taken to imply that the Jewish relationship to place is somewhat tenuous. Jews, for the most part, have tended to stress the dimension of time over that of place. "Judaism", as theologian Joshua Heschel once famously remarked, "is the art of architecture in time". Indeed, from a *religious* perspective, the Diaspora experience has been intimately bound up with expressions of Jewish messianism: the messianic dream of an end to exile and a return to Zion as a return home (with 'home' here linked to the messianic fulfilment of historical time). So, by the same token, life in the Diaspora, no matter how long

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<sup>3</sup> One can visit this website at the following address: <http://www.supportstructure.org/>

<sup>4</sup> Support Structure (August 2007) *Support, participation, and relationships to equity. Conversation between Celine Condorelli (Support Structure) and Eyal Weizman*. Available from: [http://www.supportstructure.org/ss\\_participation.html](http://www.supportstructure.org/ss_participation.html) [Accessed June 2008]

it lasts, has been supposed a temporary or passing phase: a period of prolonged waiting, displacement and deferral.

One consequence of living for so long in the precarious position of a minority outside the borders and protections of their own State, is that Jews, historically, even where they *haven't* been coerced into ghettos, camps or other enclosures, have tended to enact their religious rituals in private. Once dispersed across the Diaspora, Jewish leadership was no longer a matter for kings or princes, but for community rabbis or teachers, who, following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, relocated the majority of religious practices into the domestic setting. The home thus became the epicentre of the Jewish religion. Whence, as Gershom Scholem has analysed, the esoteric flowerings of mysticism tend to flourish amongst a people in exile – people who have nowhere else to go but the interior.

So what *is* a home? With sturdy walls made of bricks and cement and a well-tiled roof, the home shelters us from the inclemencies of the weather and hides us from unwanted visitors. It is a place of recollection - where I can be myself, at home with myself. The home is a private dwelling to which I can retreat, away from the public eye. Though I may gaze through windows at the world outside, I myself am in private; like a god who sees all but cannot be seen. My home is my corner of the world - it exists both inside the world and outside it. My address may serve some civic function, but nobody really knows what goes on behind closed doors. At home I can enjoy my home comforts, and especially the comfort of feeling confident in familiar surroundings - surroundings in which I feel I belong. My home welcomes me - it settles me. It offers me cover for my occasional desire to become invisible - withdrawn from the world into which I may, if I like, go forth, risking myself in its flux and flow because I always know that there is a fixed place, a permanent abode where I may return. At home I can shut out the uncontrollable mass outside and put it on hold until another day. My being at home is thus my way of suspending my involvements in the world - my way of recollecting myself to myself and postponing the future. This sense of feeling at home is a kind of heavenly dream - a place in which I want for nothing, for I have everything - everything belongs to me and I belong to the place I am in. Only the fact that my home has windows and doors can remind me that the world outside still beckons and the inevitability of tomorrow has not gone away. As if the “real” world were located outside, and home were an

imaginary place – a place that I need to believe in, and to create, in order to survive the *harshness* of reality.<sup>5</sup>

This dream of home (whose description has been partly inspired by Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*) isn't hard to identify with. Nor, therefore, should it be difficult to sympathise with the plight of the homeless. Edward Said warned against the romanticisation of exile as a term that should never fail to register the profound suffering and loss to which it historically alludes.<sup>6</sup> And Leo Strauss, in a different way, noted how the position of the exile suited him well because philosophers, on the whole, prefer *not* to be tied down or bound to any particular place or position. Yet, he said, he would hesitate before advocating any politics based on such personal preferences – for most people *aren't* philosophers and so most people *would* rather be at home.<sup>7</sup>

In the current era, on the other hand, Strauss' concession to "most people" begins to look beside the point. When the integrity of the nation state appears evermore compromised, it is hardly surprising that Diaspora communities have been an increasing source of interest and concern for scholars looking to gain insights into our current situation. So, notwithstanding the centrality of the home as both religious site and symbol of religious longing in the Jewish Diaspora, what I intend to do now is to consider Jewish spatial practices in the Diaspora *outside* of the home, in shared, public or communal spaces. Time is short, so I'll concentrate on one *religious* spatial practice in particular.

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The Sabbath is a weekly event: it's a day of rest and reflection when labour is strictly prohibited. And the spatial practice I'm about to describe exists in relation to this temporal event: as a space which gets *activated* only on the Sabbath. This may sound strange, indeed, the practice I'm referring to is the somewhat bizarre but rabbinically sanctioned procedure of

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<sup>5</sup> I allude here to the dream of home rather than any known reality, which I invoke notwithstanding this dream's susceptibility to various objections, and most particularly feminist objections. Suffice it to say that the home I have here in mind is not "that most dangerous place, the family home" of Adrienne Rich's poem, *Sources* (1982), but, rather, Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own".

<sup>6</sup> Said, E. W. (2001) *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*. London: Granta Books, 173-186.

<sup>7</sup> Strauss expands on this idea in his (1952) *Natural Right and History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

erecting an architectural structure called an *eruv*. There are many such constructions around the world. Some of you may recall the controversy that surrounded the construction of an *eruv* in North London, when, in February 2003, six and a half square miles of the Borough of Barnet was leased to a representative of London's Jewish community for a nominal sum of approximately one British pound.

So what is an *eruv*? An *eruv* is a ritual means of forming a community. Really, it's a kind of boundary-making device – the *eruv*'s boundaries can include already existent landmarks, but these need to form a continuous border around a designated communal space. The North London *eruv* is barely noticeable – it consists primarily of some wooden poles with an almost invisible wire running atop between them.

The religious function of the *eruv*, which we need simply to know here rather than comprehend, is to allow those who participate in it to carry any kind of object out of their houses on the Sabbath into the space the *eruv* circumscribes (for, according to Jewish law, one is not permitted to carry objects outside of the private realm on the Sabbath). The effect of this Sabbath prohibition can be very hard on those who would not be able to leave their homes *without* carrying objects – orthodox Jewish women especially, who carry babies or push prams, or those who require walking sticks or wheelchairs. Without an *eruv*, all of these effectively become prisoners in their own homes on the Sabbath.

So the purpose of the *eruv* is really to carry over or extend the boundaries of the private space *into* the public domain. Thus the *eruv* might be regarded as a support structure enabling a changed relationship to context. For the *eruv* does not produce an object – although it allows the free movement of objects within its borders. Critically, though, what the *eruv* *ultimately* supports is the imagination of certain of its residents for whom its symbolic borders mark the enlarged space of their possible participation. It offers these inhabitants permission to roam freely on their day of rest. Or, in other words, for those who have been trapped behind closed doors, the *eruv* is an invitation *into* the world outside – it's thus a way of turning the *inside out* - of feeling at home *outside* the home. In this sense, then, the act of walking becomes a religious act, and an expression of religious freedom. Indeed, the degree of controversy generated by the Barnet *eruv* reveals how an altered relationship to context can make even the most *everyday* acts appear provocative to some. As Jennifer Cousineau records:

Having made every effort to ensure either the invisibility of the perimeter or at least a sensitive integration into the surrounding landscape, the *eruv* markers were unprepared for the intensity of some of the responses to their urban vision. In evocative images published in the local and national popular press, Jews were often portrayed as aggressively claiming the space of the street simply by walking in it.<sup>8</sup>

In Hebrew the verbal root for *eruv* connotes commingling, joining, mixing, amalgamation. This alludes to the process of spatial integration as a dissolution of the boundaries between spaces. In her elucidation of the *political* symbolism of the *eruv*, Charlotte Fonrobert notes how the rabbis declared the communal space of the *eruv* as legitimate only when the wider community (referring to the neighbourhood's non-Jewish or non-orthodox members) had formally agreed to recognise it as such. This recognition is represented by the symbolic renting of the space – whereby e.g. the local mayor or chief of police accepts a nominal sum of money. The fact that a local representative “agrees to the symbolic interaction ultimately reflects his or her acknowledgement and even *support* of the legitimate presence of a Jewish community in the neighbourhood or city.”<sup>9</sup> As was eventually achieved, despite opposition, in the Borough of Barnet.

There are therefore political implications to this spatial practice. As Fonrobert writes, “a nationalist concept of collectivity assumes sovereign control over territory, and this control functions as a guarantee for the construction (or imagination) of national identity by the population living within the borders of that territory.”<sup>10</sup> (Although I think we could argue that there are forms of nationalism that do not presuppose territorial sovereignty.) That said, the *eruv* presents a *non-national* relationship to territory, which it enacts in the absence of having control of *any* form of sovereignty over the space it inhabits. Thus, the *eruv* offers one possible model of a “territoriality *without* sovereignty.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cousineau, J. (2005) Rabbinic Urbanism in London: Rituals and the Material Culture of the Sabbath. *Jewish Social Studies, Jewish Conceptions and Practices of Space*, The New Series, (11, 3), 51.

<sup>9</sup> Fonrobert, C. E. (2005) The Political Symbolism of the Eruv. *Jewish Social Studies, Jewish Conceptions and Practices of Space*, The New Series, (11, 3), 28.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

As such, this example of a spatial practice in the Diaspora may be contrasted to nationalist relationships to territory, constituted as sovereign spaces, including, of course, expressions of Jewish *national* identity; given that the modern “State of Israel has been seen as national territory with a plenitude of sovereignty, as space to be designed as the central Jewish place in the world.”<sup>12</sup>

Thus, *one* way of representing the modern Jewish experience, if we think of it in spatial rather than temporal terms, is by imagining the effect on widely dispersed communities – with many different centres around the world – of the sudden transformation, according to an imaginative geography whose symbolic power is very hard to resist, whereby what *had* been a heterogeneous and fragmentary population found itself turned, almost overnight, into one continuous periphery or circumference surrounding a single unifying centre (or territorial base) anchoring the whole. The establishment of the modern Israeli State produced precisely this effect.

Moreover, one characteristic of the transformation of the Jewish Diaspora into a periphery of the Jewish State was the relegation of the Diaspora Jew to outsider status, even within the internal dynamics of his/her own community. As Israel became the leading actor, so the Diaspora was newly cast in a supporting role, expected to prop up the Jewish State from afar.

Diaspora communities often feel moved or obliged to provide support structures or support networks for the homeland, and the forms this support can take are manifold, including anything from lobbying governments, to raising funds, to media or political representation.

Recent scholars in Jewish Studies have sought to overcome the implied opposition between homeland and Diaspora, or centre and periphery, but it *is*, I think, important to understand why this structural lay-out continues to influence those who dwell on either side of it.

In the case of Israel, its establishment immediately after the Holocaust underscored its heterogeneity to a Diaspora that had proven nothing but treacherous. Thus, those self-identifying Jews who remained in the Diaspora *after* World War II, looked upon Israel as the great redemptive figure and locus of all future hope and salvation. Israel was the place where the struggle for Jewish survival after Auschwitz was enacted with military conscription, wars

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<sup>12</sup> Fonrobert, C. E. & Shemtov, V. (2005) Introduction: Jewish Conceptions and Practices of Space. *Jewish Social Studies, Jewish Conceptions and Practices of Space*, The New Series, (11, 3), 3.

constantly fought, death constantly risked and dealt out. Whereas the *Diaspora*, after the Holocaust, was, paradoxically, probably safer than it had ever been before. So, the *least* these guilty and well off Diaspora Jewish communities felt they could do was to stand up for their brave and embattled Israeli counterparts.

These historical conditions have often made the Diaspora's supporting role appear rather unreflective and uncritical (support is generally understood as a form of defence). Fred Halliday has discussed how, in terms of conflict resolution, Diaspora communities, while committed, tend to be particularly unhelpful.<sup>13</sup> Partly, one senses, this has to do with a *lack* of sophistication concerning what *real* support might entail. For it wouldn't be unreasonable to suggest that the very *notion* of support has appeared only weakly in the discourses where it arises, as if support itself, as a term and as a concept, required some theoretical *scaffolding*, as it were, to prop it up; to support support's *own* critical potential for offering a rich variety of possible meanings and applications.

Condorelli and Wade conceive of a support structure as,

a questioning structure, a supplement, a somehow external organization, at least with a certain autonomy from the situation it addresses; this allows it to pose, expose and revise questions in relationship to its context and how to operate within it. Support is negotiation, not the application of principle but a conversation towards something that it does not define.<sup>14</sup>

Support is thus, potentially, a form of "constructive criticality". To be properly supportive, constructive criticality is called for. But constructive criticism is much easier said than done. For it's hard to criticise without partaking of an oppositional logic, which thus risks further entrenching already deep rooted prejudices and positions.

In the inflammatory context of Israel/Palestine, for example (for *example!*), support for both sides of this conflict (and the fact that support groups so often *take* sides, or have their sides

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<sup>13</sup> See for example, Halliday, F. (2007) *Palestinians and Israelis: a political impasse*. Available at: [http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/political\\_impasse\\_4671.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/political_impasse_4671.jsp) [Accessed June 2008]

<sup>14</sup> Support Structure (August 2007) *Support, participation, and relationships to equity. Conversation between Celine Condorelli (Support Structure) and Eyal Weizman*. Available at: [http://www.supportstructure.org/ss\\_participation.html](http://www.supportstructure.org/ss_participation.html) [Accessed June 2008]

pre-selected for them) has tended to be marked by precisely this type of failure – support groups, even when they are acting in good faith, frequently reinforce the conflictual apparatuses they were intending to remedy. Indeed, the architectural aspects of the Middle East conflict – separation walls, checkpoints, settlements, etc. - carry such obvious symbolic weight that these features can often find their meanings *over-determined*. As such, intervening discourses (from the right or the left) can often overwhelm the political contexts to which they refer by *de*-contextualising in favour of much wider ideological mapping. Whereas, to negotiate requires taking *context* into account – for only the contextual (as that which is always conditioned by the temporal) may be *open* to compromise.

So where does this leave me? Well, as a Diaspora Jew, I *have* been concerned with how to assume the responsibility of a presupposed supporting position vis-à-vis the Jewish State. I have found this position a tremendously difficult and, if I'm honest, tortuous one to uphold. It is tempting to reject the claims made upon me by a situation I did not *choose* to be in as fundamentally illegitimate. It is tempting to disown, disavow or at least distance myself from a place whose politics I have grown to deplore. For it has by no means been clear to me how best to support (rather than arrogate) the production of new relationships to context that might create new political and social realities. Nor has it been clear to me how best to express constructive criticality. After all, just as uncritical support serves no-one, so unsupportive criticism serves only to bolster already entrenched and uncompromising positions.

Yet one possible avenue may be to revise the received wisdom concerning the Jewish Diaspora as a purely negative situation marked only by pogroms, inquisitions and genocide. For the history of the Diaspora has not only included some golden ages of Jewish life and creativity, but it can also reveal ways in which Jews *have* been able to participate in public spaces over which they've lacked sovereignty or control. Places whose borders are largely symbolic, without need of walls, where there has been security in *insecurity*.

The *eruv* is an example of how Jews in exile have been able to feel at home *outside* the home, and thus been able to carry on their *private* lives in public. (And there are other such examples as well.) “If a right to the secret is not maintained”, says Derrida, “then we are in a totalitarian space”<sup>15</sup>. So the movement I've here been analysing – which draws (enables or

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<sup>15</sup> Derrida, J. & Ferraris, M. (2001) *A Taste for the Secret*. London: Polity, 59.

allows) the inside out, which permits the secret to appear *as* secret – would be absolutely critical from a democratic point of view.

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In public conversation with Geoff Bennington following the English publication of *The Politics of Friendship*, Derrida remarked that:

there is some type of experience, of political experience in friendship and hospitality which cannot be simply the object of a theory.<sup>16</sup>

This “type of [political] experience” is thus forbidden for the philosopher, much as music is or was for Derrida. In this sense, it might be said to carry an aspect of the sacred; which is to say, if we can extend the metaphor, what would constitute consecrated ground or ‘holy land’ within the political arena, would have to have resisted all theoretical appropriation (whether by ideology or political science).

Derrida’s effort to, as he put it, “re-think what the political is”, saw him recall terms and ideas that have been forgotten, ignored or passed over by more mainstream political discourse. In many cases he returns to the *religious* source of those ideas – in his reflections, for example, on Hospitality, Forgiveness, Friendship, Mourning, the Gift, or the Messianic. By invoking these types of experience, the political object, or the political *objective*, has, once again, been rendered partial – returned to the dimension of time as well as space; for the promise of transformation depends on what always remains unknown about the future, and on a political map whose co-ordinates have not been completely determined in advance.

Support structures understand the spaces they help to create as contexts – and contexts, as noted, can be partly defined by their assumed temporality, or by their indeterminate qualities. The facts on the ground can shift and change. There is music frozen within the architecture. Not everything can be seen, or heard, at once. And so, to best address this type of experience, untranslatable though it may be, is to enter into a form of distinctly political (although not exclusively political) engagement. As Derrida describes his approach to music:

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<sup>16</sup> Bennington, G. (1997) *Politics and Friendship: A Discussion with Jacques Derrida*. Available at: <http://hydra.umn.edu/derrida/pol+fr.html> [Accessed June 2008]

Music, if there is any and if it happens in the text, mine or that of others, if there is any music, first of all I listen to it. It is the experience itself of impossible appropriation. The most joyous and the most tragic.<sup>17</sup>

It seems to me that this is precisely the form of political engagement that support structures such as The Olive Tree Scholarship programme and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra are committed to. For which reason, today's event – which addresses that most overly determined of political contexts through music – is one in which I am very glad to participate, by speaking, but most of all, by listening.

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<sup>17</sup> Points, 394-5.