Hannah Arendt in an interview with FokusIsrael.ch: “When you are attacked as a Jew, you must defend yourself as a Jew”

About the Person

Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) was one of the sharpest and most controversial political thinkers of the 20th century. She distrusted any form of intellectual conformity. In opposition to ideology, authority, and the pressure of the collective, she advocated for personal responsibility and “thinking without a safety railing”: the courage to judge for oneself radically. Raised in Königsberg, she studied philosophy, theology, and Greek, under Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, among others. In 1933, Hannah Arendt fled to Paris to escape the Nazis. After the outbreak of World War II and the German Wehrmacht’s invasion of France, she was interned at the Gurs camp—ironically, because of her German heritage. However, she managed to escape. In 1941, she reached the United States, where she was granted American citizenship in 1951—after 18 years of statelessness. Her experience of flight and lack of legal standing led her to the insight of “the right to have rights”: Rights require a political community that guarantees them.

In New York, Arendt initially worked as a journalist and editor; later, she worked for Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, an organization that recovered and redistributed Jewish books and cultural artifacts looted after the Holocaust. She later taught at various American universities, serving as a professor in Chicago beginning in 1963 and as a University Professor at the New School for Social Research in New York beginning in 1967. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), she analyzed the mechanisms of totalitarian rule; in *Vita Activa* (1958), she explored freedom, action, and plurality. “Eichmann in Jerusalem” (1963), her account of the trial of the Nazi mass murderer Adolf Eichmann, which she had observed in Jerusalem in 1961 for *The New Yorker*, brought her worldwide fame and plunged her into a scandal. Her concept of the “banality of evil” became as famous as it was misunderstood. With the help of AI, FokusIsrael.ch spoke with Hannah Arendt about Eichmann and the Jewish Councils, her lifelong connection to Heidegger, resistance and Israel, political responsibility—and the abysses of power.

Hannah Arendt, you lack “Ahavat Israel”—love for the Jewish people. That is what the historian of religion Gershom Scholem accused you of following your series of articles in *The New Yorker* on the trial of Adolf Eichmann. Is he right?

Hannah Arendt: Yes. I don’t “love” any collectives—neither the German one, nor the French one, nor the American one, nor the working class, nor anything else. In fact, I love only my friends and am otherwise completely incapable of any other kind of love. Since I myself am, naturally and in fact, Jewish, a love for the Jews would seem

suspicious to me.

Even when it comes to the extermination of the Jews? You reported on the trial in a cool and detached manner—you even laughed.

Hannah Arendt: I laughed at Eichmann’s grotesque pomposity. He was no Iago and no Macbeth. Despite the prosecutor’s efforts, everyone could see that this man was no monster. It was, in fact, very difficult to shake the suspicion that one was dealing with a buffoon. Rather, it was sheer thoughtlessness—which is by no means the same as stupidity—that predestined him to become one of the greatest criminals in history. His inability to think was evident precisely in his inability to put himself in someone else’s shoes.

The Banality of Evil…

Hannah Arendt: It was the man who was banal, not what he did. The crimes were monstrous. What was disturbing was that the perpetrator lacked any corresponding demonic grandeur. He was a functionary. The functionary convinces himself that he isn’t acting at all. He is merely carrying out orders and passing the responsibility upward, always one level higher, until ultimately it lies with no one. That is the “rule of no one.”

Today we know that this “clown” was a staunch Nazi and a fanatical anti-Semite. In Argentina, he boasted about his role. Did you underestimate him?

Hannah Arendt: I had the man in the glass booth standing before me; later sources paint a different picture of Eichmann. We must take that into account. Facts are more persistent than theories—fortunately. But fanaticism and thoughtlessness are not mutually exclusive. A mind can be full of Nazi slogans and yet still be incapable of thinking.

Following Kant, you strongly emphasize in your writings that no one has the right to obey, since obedience is always a choice. But isn’t it asking too much to expect someone living under a dictatorship to disobey for moral reasons?

Hannah Arendt: Not everyone is obligated to be a hero. But everyone remains responsible for their own actions. “I was afraid” may be true. “I was therefore not responsible” is something else entirely. Politically speaking, there is no such thing as obedience. Obedience to political authority is always also consent and support.

When it comes to the Jewish Councils, you pass harsh judgment on people who were hardly able to act freely.

Hannah Arendt: Historical truth offers no consolation. Jewish officials provided the Nazis with lists of names and assets, organized transports, and thus became part of the administrative structure. The role of Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter in this entire dark history.

The darkest? The victims—not the perpetrators?

Hannah Arendt: You are confusing responsibility with guilt. The guilt for the extermination lay with the Nazis and their collaborators. For me, the darkest aspect was that they succeeded in incorporating even the organizations of the persecuted into the machinery of their extermination—this revealed the totality of the moral collapse that the Nazis had brought about in Europe. This does not mean that their guilt as murderers is shared.

In Martin Heidegger’s case, however, this standard seems to shift. He joined the NSDAP in 1933 and remained a member until 1945. Nevertheless, they remained loyal to him throughout his life and contributed to his intellectual rehabilitation after the war.

Hannah Arendt: That’s an uncomfortable objection—so it’s probably a good one. A political judgment about an action is not the same as a judgment about a person as a whole. Heidegger failed politically in a truly spectacular way in 1933. It does not follow, however, that a great philosopher ceases to be a great philosopher because of that. Thinking and political judgment are not the same thing—Heidegger provides a striking example of this.

You yourself have said about 1933: “From then on, I was responsible.”

With the Reichstag fire and the illegal arrests, it became clear to me: the rule of law was being shattered. I could no longer just stand by and watch. For the Zionist Association for Germany, I collected material on Nazi anti-Semitism and hid refugees in our apartment. I was found out and arrested by the Gestapo. They accused me of “propaganda of horror” [laughs]. Luckily, I was released after eight days and fled immediately to Paris. There, among other things, I worked for the Youth Aliyah, which brought Jewish children and teenagers to Palestine. The real shock, however, came later with Auschwitz, with the “manufacturing of corpses.”

That’s when an abyss opened up. Everything else, one thought, could have been made up for in politics at some point. Not this.

Many, however, did not recognize—or did not want to recognize—what was happening. How could that be?

Hannah Arendt: Intellectuals,in particular , still believed that the Nazis could be understood—or even “tamed”—using old political categories. They came up with highly intriguing theories about Hitler and fell into the trap of their own ideas. It was known long before 1933 that the Nazis were our enemies. Hitler had made no secret of it. I took the Nazis at their word. When you’re attacked as a Jew, you have to defend yourself as a Jew—not as an abstract citizen of the world, but in concrete terms.

You also advocated for Jewish self-defense on a political level: You called for a Jewish army. At the same time, you were suspicious of a sovereign Jewish nation-state. Why should Jews be allowed to fight but not to rule themselves?

Hannah Arendt: Jews should fight Hitler as Jews—under their own banner—and not merely go down in history as victims. And, of course, the Jews need a homeland of their own. The only question is what political form it should take. I feared a Jewish state that, surrounded by enemies, would live in a state of perpetual war and ultimately make its existence dependent on the support of a foreign great power.

They advocated for a Jewish-Arab federation, a binational community, and, using purely secular arguments, championed peaceful coexistence. But when parts of the Arab world, driven by a religious hatred aimed at annihilation, reject Israel’s very existence—wasn’t political reason your blind spot here?

Hannah Arendt: Politics presupposes that people argue over interests, territories, and compromises. Anyone who claims a divine mandate for destruction leaves this political space—they seek to wipe out the world’s plurality. No argument can counter this; only resolute self-assertion can. After all, it’s hard to negotiate border lines with God.

Today, religious hardliners in Israel itself wield considerable political influence. How great is the danger to the country?

Hannah Arendt: The failure to separate religion and state in Israel is disastrous. It

subordinates the rights of the individual to their religious affiliation. Where the collective rules over the citizen, affiliation becomes domination. This is particularly evident in family law. A political community, however, must treat its citizens as citizens—not first and foremost as members of a religious community.

You are wary of any concentration of power. In the U.S. of all places, there is currently a struggle over the limits of presidential power. Does that concern you?

Hannah Arendt: Of course. America’s great political discovery was that power must be limited by power. Where judicial independence and the mutual checks and balances among institutions break down, political freedom is the first thing to be lost. Not because every president becomes a tyrant, but because a republic must not be dependent on the hope that he will not become one.

And what happens when power knows no limits at all?

Hannah Arendt: Even unlimited power is not necessarily totalitarian. The tyrant seeks to dominate citizens in order to secure his own power, but allows them to maintain an apolitical private life. Totalitarianism seeks to transform human beings themselves. It systematically destroys all bonds and, with them, the shared world—the space *between* people in which they can speak, judge, and act with one another in the first place.

Do you see signs of this today?

Hannah Arendt: It becomes dangerous when people become isolated, when facts lose their binding force, and when ideologies replace reality with a self-contained logic. The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced fanatic, but the person for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, no longer exists.

Note: This interview is based on the writings and recorded statements of Hannah Arendt, which were identified and reproduced with the help of AI. In our series “Conversations with Legends,” we speak with deceased figures from the worlds of politics, religion, science, and culture who were significant to Judaism and Israel. Our aim is to bring them and their ideas closer to today’s audience. Interviews published so far include those with

Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism

Chaim Weizmann, Israel’s first president

David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister

Golda Meir, Israel’s only female prime minister to date

Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian president who traveled to Jerusalem in 1977 to make peace with Israel

Moses, who led the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt and into freedom

Maimonides, the great Jewish scholar who lived in the 12th and 13th centuries

Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis

Albert Einstein, the founder of the theory of relativity

Robert Oppenheimer, the “father of the atomic bomb”

Hedy Lamarr, the Hollywood icon and inventor

Estée Lauder, the entrepreneur and founder of a global corporation

Milton Friedman, Nobel laureate in economics

Levi Strauss, the inventor of jeans

Elie Wiesel, writer and Nobel Peace Prize laureate

Primo Levi, the Italian chemist and writer

Theodor Adorno, the German philosopher and sociologist

Martin Buber, philosopher, scholar of religion, and writer.