"CAN WE BE COSMOPOLITAN TRIBALISTS?"

SHAI LAVI AND KHALED FURANI

KHALED FURANI [KF]: I am a citizen of two countries, both of which are connected to various forms of tribalism, cosmopolitanism, and projects of freedom and enslavement. By that, I mean Israel and the United States, both of which I am a citizen of. However, I'm not a citizen in the sense of my Palestinian nationality or the faith tradition I speak from, which is Islam. I want to think about how to examine and investigate tribalism, cosmopolitanism, and what lies beyond them.

SHAI LAVI [SL]: I come from Tel Aviv. I'm an observant Jew and a committed Israeli, though that doesn't necessarily make me proud these days; perhaps I'm a sad one in this time. I hope we'll have a chance to discuss this, about pride and whether it belongs in our identity or not.

KF: Shai and I both share a certain fondness for the ideas we've learned from Hannah Arendt, despite some of the misguided things we've sometimes heard from her. Hopefully, we can bring that expertise – Shai as a professor of law and I as an anthropologist – into our discussion. To begin, I'd like to pose a question: What are tribalism and cosmopolitanism? Are they timeless phenomena, or are they specifically modern constructions?

SL: To start, I think it's best to think of tribalism and cosmopolitanism together, as a matrix. Part of what we'll try to do is think about this matrix, but also think outside of it. Let me clarify what I mean. Tribalism and cosmopolitanism are just two ways of addressing the real issue at hand. Tribalism refers to our particular belongings, the groups we belong to, while cosmopolitanism talks about our shared humanity. The fact that

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111674988-027

these ideas are contrasted creates a matrix, one that already assumes a lot about the relationship between them. Our goal will be to think outside of this matrix.

Let me explain a bit about what I see as this matrix, particularly the relationship between tribalism and cosmopolitanism. We can start with cosmopolitanism. Although the idea has ancient roots, it takes on a distinctly contemporary form in relation to tribalism. The idea is that in order to be cosmopolitan, you need to move beyond your particular identity, to transcend your particular belongings. Cosmopolitanism is often seen as a way of thinking beyond these individual identities.

This transition from tribalism to cosmopolitanism is often framed as progress – historical progress, as Sebastian beautifully described in his talk; or evolutionary progress. Humanity starts in clans and tribes and then forms states, eventually scaling up to a cosmopolitan vision. The idea is to move from one to the other.

What's interesting to question, however, is whether this is the only way to think about shared humanity. Do we need to transcend our bounded identities to think about our common humanity, or can we find that shared humanity within our particular commitments?

Tribalism speaks to our bounded identity, to where we come from, but it's not the only way to think about it. When juxtaposed with cosmopolitanism, tribalism often assumes strong exclusion and rivalry. It suggests that our identities are more important than other commitments – "My country, right or wrong." It creates certain expectations about identity.

What we want to explore, Khaled, is how to think about these ideas not just as contrasts – tribalism versus cosmopolitanism – and perhaps not even use these terms so rigidly. Instead, we want to search for new ways to think about our commitments, both to our particular belongings and to our shared humanity.

In this context, Khaled, I want to ask you: Do you think turning to tradition, both as a way of belonging and as a concept or resource, can offer us tools to rethink this tension – or what seems like a tension – between tribalism and cosmopolitanism?

KF: On an anecdotal note, when I received Roger's kind invitation, one of the questions posed to me was: 'How does one navigate the dual loyalties of tribal and cosmopolitan identities?' And I thought, wait a minute – why

are they considered dual? Is there an inherent tension, or is it perhaps only an apparent one? What happens if we introduce the concept of tradition into this conversation? Tradition could enter in many ways, and today, we can try to explore some of those. I can think of five or six approaches, though there may be more. It's striking that this concept is largely absent from the conversation. I was pleased to hear you, Roger, speak about tradition today. In the spirit of Hannah Arendt, we might wonder: how would she view the duality of tribalism and cosmopolitanism? Is this tension real or fictitious?

From the perspective of a tradition, it's interesting – let me share two observations, Shai. Some of the leading authors who discuss the "tribalism-cosmopolitanism divide" go to great lengths not to use the word "tradition." Think of figures like Walzer, Nussbaum, or Appiah. Even in their language, the word "tradition" is conspicuously absent, despite how much it could streamline their arguments. But this absence is symptomatic of a deeper neglect of tradition as a concept and category of thought, even philosophically.

What if we live in a tradition that teaches us to belong to a world where both the cosmopolitan and the tribal exist simultaneously, as Arendt might say, Janus-faced? Could we be both at once?

I don't want to be a party pooper, but when we think through the concept of tradition, it helps bracket the conversation and potentially opens it up to a deeper exploration. I'm thinking, perhaps scripturally or theologically – what if there are ways of belonging that go beyond the dichotomy of tribe or cosmopolis? Let me stop here.

SL: For me, returning to tradition as a framework opens up other possibilities. For example, what if we didn't need to transcend tradition but rather dug deeper into it to find our shared humanity?

Take the first book of Genesis, for instance. It speaks of a shared humanity from the very beginning of tradition. We are created in the image of God, but this is not some detached, abstract universalism. It's a language within the tradition. Rather than transcending tradition to reach cosmopolitanism, perhaps we can reach into tradition itself to find a shared humanity. Or, in terms of evolutionary theory, the assumption might be that our primary commitment is to the tribe. But is that what tradition teaches us? Consider the last piece of bread – who do you give

it to? Evolutionary theory might suggest giving it to your own, but tribal hospitality could suggest otherwise: that your primary commitment is not to yourself. This is also part of tradition.

So, what possibilities emerge when we don't treat these ideas as mere contrasts?

Let me share an anecdote. I was sitting on a plane next to an ultra-Orthodox Hassidic man, an American who had emigrated to Israel. I asked him, 'Why move to Israel?' He said, 'What do you mean, why? I'm a committed Israeli. I'll fight for a better Israel'. I asked, 'But why you, born in America? Why come here?'

He was surprised by the question. He said, 'All the Israelis I know are so proud to be Israeli'. This made me reflect, and I was able to have this conversation because, in a sense, we share the same tradition. I said to him, 'In our tradition, pride can be problematic. We can say we're blessed to be Jewish or grateful for the opportunities we've had, but pride assumes that you're always on the "good side." You want to be proud of your children, but that's not the primary relationship you have with them. It's a kind of commitment.'

In a tradition, there isn't an external perspective to judge it from if you're fully embedded in it, but it provides tools to think critically and to make the most of that tradition. It's a different relationship altogether. This opens up a space for thinking about all this.

KF: I see two ways in which tradition might expand our conversation about the tribalism-cosmopolitanism duality. The first is by clarifying concepts – making distinctions that help reduce confusion. I've found it helpful, Shai, and I wonder what you think, to distinguish between being part of a tribe and being a tribalist, just as there's a difference between being cosmopolitan and practicing cosmopolitanism. It's important not to confuse these terms.

From my position within the Muslim tradition, it's strange to be a citizen of a tribal state like Israel, while being part of a faith tradition that is very much anti-tribalist – and let me emphasize: not *anti-tribal*. In Islam, the tribe is recognized as a fact of human existence; it's accepted, and one could even argue, honored. But tribalism itself is problematic.

The same could be said about cosmopolitanism. It represents an openness to others or something beyond your immediate collective. But

cosmopolitanism, too, has its dangers. Both tribalism and cosmopolitanism can impose violence on the boundaries we draw around ourselves. Tribalism could violate the belonging to a group, while cosmopolitanism could dissolve claims to particularity, leading to a sense of rootlessness.

With these analytical distinctions in mind, I'll offer one more anecdote to illustrate how tradition can help us think through this supposed duality. When I visit Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, for example, and meet someone from Jamaica, India, or London, my faith tradition links me to a broader cosmopolitan space. Belonging to a tradition can help you discover your non-belonging as well.

In my Muslim faith, there's an underlying premise that we belong to God – *Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un* ("We belong to God, and to God we return"). This understanding transcends the simple belonging to a group; it reminds us of a deeper relationship with the divine. Even if you're a Stoic or follow other traditions, the underlying theme is the same: there is something more fundamental than human belonging.

This complexity should not be abandoned when thinking about how tradition can enrich our conversation. Some traditions push us to think about belonging through the lens of non-belonging, teaching us how we don't belong to this world in some sense. Let me stop here.

SL: I want to return to the topic of Al-Aqsa and sacred spaces, but before we get there, I want to touch on something you said. I like the way you distinguish between being tribal and tribalism, and between cosmopolitanism and being cosmopolitan. But I think the term "tribe" is often overused to describe many different kinds of belonging. We should be cautious about that. People say, "I belong to my family, that's tribal," or "I belong to my religion, that's tribal," or "I belong to my ethnicity, that's tribal," even "I belong to my soccer team, that's tribal." This reminds me of how people often use the term "religion." They call Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism religions, but they also call Marxism or nationalism a religion in some sense. Arendt discusses this in her work on authority, and I think she would say this blurs things rather than clarifies. We need to be careful not to conflate different categories of belonging.

That brings us to the question of scripture. Both the Muslim and Jewish traditions use the word "tribe," but it carries different meanings in each tradition. We should consider those meanings.

I'd also like to share my own anecdote. There's a part of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem where I like to go. It's a more secluded area, co-ed, where men and women can pray together. It's quieter, and I sit there on Saturday afternoons, listening to the mosque's call to prayer. This setting opens a different understanding of shared humanity. As an observant Jew, I'm sitting as close as I can to the holiest site in Judaism, while hearing the mosque, sharing the same space. This raises the question of what it means to belong to a sacred space that doesn't necessarily divide people but also doesn't transcend their tribal identities. From within these traditions, we can still find commonality.

KF: Yes, yet, with that point, it's shared, though we must also recognize the ways our traditions meet and diverge. I often tell Shai that I think Islam critiques certain aspects of the Jewish tradition, particularly the tribalism within it. In Islam, Muhammad is described as a prophet for all of humanity, which reflects a kind of cosmopolitanism. And the Quran speaks of God's revelation being for all of humanity, as in the phrase al-Nas. Think of the verse/aya in the Quran as sent to Prophet Muhammad for bringing "humans to exit darkness into light." Also, if we look at the story of Abraham – the patriarch who founded a tribe – we see that he also took actions that went beyond the tribe. For instance, in Surah VI, Verse 74, Abraham challenges his father, Azar, asking him why he worships idols. He says, "I see you and your people in great loss," separating himself from his own kin. This suggests that while one can be proud of one's kin, it's crucial not to make that pride absolute. Abraham saw bonds that extended beyond the tribe. It seems to me that even though Abraham is a patriarch, he was willing to recognize connections beyond tribal affiliation.

SL: Khaled has raised an interesting and profound question about the relationship between traditions. I want to hold onto that, but I'm not entirely sure what to make of it, so I'll ask you, Khaled, to clarify.

At face value, it seems like you're suggesting that Islam critiques Judaism for being more tribal, because its revelation was meant for a specific people, not for all of humanity. We've heard this critique from Christianity as well: Judaism is seen as tribal, and the Gospel, particularly from Paul, is seen as universal, meant for the nations.

I want to think about that and ask you about it. But before I do, I think it's worth bringing in the figure of Abraham, because he's important in both the Jewish and Islamic traditions. Abraham is seen as the father of many nations, not just the Israelites or the Jewish people. His name changes from Avram to Abraham, and that extra "h" symbolizes his role as the father of many nations. So, from the very beginning, there's an idea of plurality in his identity.

There are two ways to think about this. One way is to view it through the lens of tribalism vs. cosmopolitanism, suggesting some sort of progression, where the tribal identity eventually gives way to a universal identity. This idea of progression, or supercessionism, is characteristic of Christianity's relationship with Judaism – Christianity initially saw itself as replacing Judaism, with the New Testament offering a universal truth that superseded the particularity of the Jewish tribe.

And sometimes when I hear you speak about Islam, Khaled, I think it follows a similar pattern. Just as Christianity critiques Judaism for its tribalism, Islam seems to critique Judaism for being particular and urges moving beyond the tribal to something more universal. I wonder about that. So, I'll stop here and ask you about that.

KF: Although both critiques may address certain practices of Judaism, I wouldn't rush to conflate them, even though there is a relationship between Christianity and Judaism in terms of one superseding the other. Islam, however, isn't about superseding; it's about returning to the original message. Islam tells the Jews, "You had the good message, but why did you corrupt it?" It doesn't suggest that the message was wrong to begin with. Islam, in this sense, is about returning to Abraham. In the Quran, Abraham is seeking something to believe in, wondering if the moon or the sun is God until he concludes that God cannot be one of these transient things. God, he realizes, is not something you can see with your eyes.

What I'm trying to say, Shai, is that we should avoid conflating Islamic and Christian critiques of Judaism. Each tradition has its own self-understanding and its own way of relating to Judaism. At least in Islam, there is recognition of a shared truth in the belief in one God, and the idea that heaven is potentially open for all. It's not about who you're related to or who's in your heart – it's about what you do.

But before we dive into the eschatological debates, which I don't feel particularly equipped or interested in discussing, let's return to the conversation about tribalism and cosmopolitanism. We've seen how introducing tradition into this conversation can open up various avenues.

I want to invite us, Shai, and perhaps the audience as well, to ask: What kind of duality is this, tribalism versus cosmopolitanism? When did it emerge, and how? Is it a distinctly modern duality? People have always claimed particular identities and universality. Modernity doesn't have a monopoly on this. But could this duality, when viewed through the lens of tradition, be a modern construct, perhaps emerging as a response to a crisis in our existence? Could it be a response to a specific European history of managing difference and plurality? After all, what's the difference that matters most in this formulation? The differences between tribes, peoples, and policies. But as I've alluded to through the Abrahamic narrative, there are deeper differences to consider.

Let me put it this way, and I'll end my point here: Walter Benjamin, a friend of Hannah Arendt, whom she remained loyal to more than Adorno and Horkheimer did, wrote something I think in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (though it might be in another essay). He talks about how the gods have fled in the modern age, and all that's left for humans is to observe each other. I wonder if this duality is a product of that departure.

SL: I want to hear more from you, Khaled, but let me share some of my thoughts, and maybe you can elaborate on them. I'm struck by how we talk about tribalism today in terms of identity – how we form and shape our identities. I wonder whether this can be contrasted with more traditional ways of thinking about belonging. At what point does belonging become a question of identity? By identity, I mean self-fashioning – deciding who we are and how we present ourselves. This fits well with nationalism and self-determination, where the focus is on determining who we are. It also aligns with identity politics, which centers around how we understand ourselves.

But I wonder whether this sense of belonging as identity contrasts with other forms of belonging – especially those we don't choose, like being born into a particular group. There's also the notion of non-identity, being a stranger rather than being at one with oneself. Specifically, in the

context of the Jewish tradition, I think of the commandment not to wrong or oppress the stranger, because you too have been strangers in the land of Egypt. The beginning of the Israelite people, the Jewish people, starts with them as strangers in the land. They receive the Torah outside of the land, and so there's this element of being a stranger rather than feeling at home, embedded in the concept of belonging. I wonder what you think about this.

KF: There are three things I think are worth mentioning: First, as a Palestinian, I find it troubling that Israel represents not just a threat to Palestinian lives, but also to the rich ethical tradition of Judaism. I think both you and I know people who've made this point: that a nation-state itself is a threat to the ethical inheritance of Judaism.

Second, regarding your point about identity – while I don't claim to speak with authority on identity as a concept, I want to raise a question: Why do we frame things as a duality, between foreignness or being a stranger and having an identity? Sometimes I wonder if our obsession with identity is a symptom of a modern crisis – a loss of identity or a lack of anchoring in the world. I'm not offering an answer, but asking: why is identity such a pressing issue today? Does it reflect a deeper sense of dislocation?

Third, you made me think of a prophetic tradition from the Hadith, which has been preoccupying me in the context of this conversation. It might be shocking, but I invite you to think with me about how this tradition can help us reflect on the categories and experiences we're discussing today.

The Prophet Muhammad once said that Islam entered the world as a foreigner and will return as a foreigner. His companions were puzzled – what does it mean that Islam entered and will return as a foreigner? He replied, "Blessed are the strangers." When asked what he meant by "strangers," he said, "Those who command good and forbid evil." Perhaps foreignness isn't just about identity, but also an ethical stance in the world. This idea appears in its secular form in the 20th century, when Adorno wrote in Minima Moralia that part of ethics is being at home nowhere. So when I think of foreignness, I think it's tied to taking an ethical stance – even if it places you on the losing side. It's about defending not just Palestinian lives, but the fundamental idea that all lives matter.

SL: Khaled, I think you've drawn an important distinction – one that applies not only to the Israel-Palestine context but also more broadly, about the tension between the Jewish tradition and the State of Israel, between the people and the state. I want to bring in a quote from Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra: "Somewhere there are still people and herds, but not with us, my brethren. Here there are states. A state – what is that? Well, open your ears to me, for now I will say unto you my word concerning the death of peoples. A state is called the coldest of all cold monsters. It coldly lies, and this lie creeps from its mouth: 'I, the state, am the people'."

I think that an historical perspective, grounded in tradition, allows us to conceptualize different kinds of belonging. It helps us critique, think critically, and look beyond identity and pride. We can understand and criticize these constructs.

But I also think, Khaled, that tradition is precisely what we no longer fully possess. This is part of the modern condition. We can't just return to tradition as it once was. Of course, people still maintain their traditions and religions, and I do as well. But I'm not talking about individual commitments here; I'm talking about the world at large. Clearly, traditions – at least in the way we're thinking of them – no longer have the same influence. We live in a modern world of states, with all the negative implications that come with it. But this is the world we inhabit.

I think one of the challenges Arendt posed to Zionism and the broader project was how to engage with the modern moment we're in – how to navigate the process of self-fashioning, identity formation, and national commitment, but in a way that remains critical of the nation-state and the specific constructions of identity and belonging it entails.

KF: One of the major struggles we face in Palestine and elsewhere is disentangling the idea that Jewish people are synonymous with Israel. It's a dangerous and implicit move in modern times to equate the two, which could, in some ways, be a form of anti-Semitism. But beyond this political issue, Shai, I'm not sure I would speak about tradition in the singular. Perhaps the authority of tradition – epistemic, ethical, ontological – has diminished, but I think our conversation would be richer if we allowed for a plurality of notions and understandings of tradition.

Take liberalism, for example. One way to view it is as an opposition to tradition, but as scholars of liberalism would point out, it has itself

become a tradition – a tradition of opposing tradition, in some sense. It's not the only way to understand liberalism, but it's one perspective. I'd also like to draw on other sources of thinking about tradition, from Aristotle to thinkers in the Arab world or MacIntyre in the West. This includes not just medieval figures like Thomas Aquinas and Rambam, but also thinkers like Arendt, who see tradition as something we inherit – a transmission, a conversation with beginnings. Tradition, in this sense, is a way to engage with the past in the present while imagining future possibilities. From that perspective, it's hard to see anyone outside of tradition entirely. Even the way we talk about belonging is within a tradition, even though it arose after the collapse of the Roman trinity, as Arendt described it – authority, religion, and... freedom. No, authority, religion, and tradition. So, perhaps we should abandon the idea that we can think or speak from a place completely free of tradition.

SL: I agree with much of what you said. I think even the absence of tradition is itself a certain presence of tradition. The fact that we can't reach back to tradition isn't nothing; it's something we can think about. It's no coincidence that Nietzsche, when he talked about the state, referred to it as the new idol, using religious language to critique the new societal creation. He employed this traditional language to address the challenges of modern society. I think this is in the spirit of what we're trying to explore.

What does it mean to think about tradition – not to revive something dead, but to consider it in the context of contemporary challenges? How do we approach notions like pride, self-fashioning, self-determination, and identity, when what we have in mind isn't the liberal subject – the all-powerful individual determining their own future – but rather a more nuanced understanding of who we are and where we stand?

Q1: Khaled, I want to thank you for your contribution on tradition. But I have a question for clarification – this is not a challenge. I wonder if, in your introduction of tradition, you're in some way introducing another hierarchical binary, between modernity and tradition. It seems to me that, in every modernity, there's tradition, and in every tradition, there's something good from modernity, like gender equality. Is the idea not to flip the hierarchy – put tradition on top and modernity on the bottom, and battle which is having more influence – but to disrupt the binary

entirely? To see that the best of tradition is often present in modern belief, and the best of modernity is also found in traditional beliefs. So, we resist flipping the binary, which we constantly do on both the right and the left.

KF: I'm sorry if I came across as suggesting a hierarchy, implying that tradition is above modernity. As a scholar of Arab poetics and Palestinian poetics, I've seen that argument made, and it makes sense to me. I agree with what you're saying – that we need not think of them conceptually as a hierarchy or pit them against each other. However, let me clarify, and I appreciate your question. When I use the term "modernity," I have in mind a very specific political, ethical, and epistemic project, which we are all products of. It's not just intellectual; it's a political project.

Q2: Thanks for making the trip here to talk to us, and for such a rich conversation. I have to start by asking your forgiveness because, every time you said the word 'tradition', I heard Tevye from Fiddler on the Roof singing in the back of my mind.

So, I'm with you on the idea of getting beyond dualism, where we have tribalism and cosmopolitanism. But I'm wondering if what you're talking about isn't very similar to what the Judith Butler has written about when they talk about living as minorities among minorities, or living in exile, or living in diaspora. Exile, in this sense, becomes an act of being critical of those in power. I think something missing from the conversation so far is the question of power. You can care about members of your own tribe, but when you're the hegemon, it becomes problematic for others. There's a rich tradition, especially in Jewish studies; Shaul Magid just wrote a book called Necessity of Exile. It sounds like this has something to do with what you're talking about, and I'd like to hear your thoughts.

Q3: I think you've answered the panel's main question in the affirmative: Tribalism can be cosmopolitan. This is a beautiful example of that. Maybe the next question is: Can enough tribalists be cosmopolitan to make a difference? I'm thinking of the examples you both discussed – praying at the Western Wall, being at Al-Aqsa Mosque, having connections to other traditions or people within your own tradition. But I'm also thinking about how much tension and violence have happened at those very spots. Can the beauty of this conversation be translated more broadly? How could

that happen? I think part of the discussion is what kinds of tribes we're talking about. I think, Shai, you were right to mention that there's been some conceptual slippage about the types of entities we're discussing when we talk about tribes.

So far, the discussion has been mostly about religious traditions, with some references to states and nations. There's also been mention of Palestinian nationalism, which includes not just Islam but also Christianity. I think the question of power is relevant here too. Netanyahu probably doesn't care much about these conversations. Hamas probably doesn't either. On October 7, there was no distinction between Jew and Muslim in terms of who was slaughtered. How do we take the beauty of today's conversation and turn it into something that matters politically and socially for the world?

SL: Let me try to answer the last two questions together. I think – at least speaking for myself; Khaled, feel free to share your thoughts – being critical of power is very important. But I think, especially in response to your questions, what's perhaps more important right now is understanding what it means to be powerful in a critical way. That's a different thing. It's one thing to stand outside of power and criticize it. Some of the authors you mentioned are offering a critical position toward power – maybe even the relationship between the prophet and the king if we return to tradition. But for me, and I think for [??], it's a different question.

Now that there is sovereignty, now that we're in the modern moment, and now that we have a state, the question becomes: How do we use power critically, from a powerful but also fragile position? How do we understand that power comes with fragility? How do we understand the formation of modern states, without repeating the European mistakes of the nation-state, which was Hannah Arendt's concern? How do we bring these insights to a moment of power, not just as a critique of it? I think the key question is not how to stand outside and criticize, but how to stand inside and think about how this can happen.

KF: I think I'll have an easier time addressing your question about the repetition of this experience. We are, in some ways, the repetition of something that's been happening for a long time – if you just expand our imagination. When I heard you, I thought of Malcolm X. I thought of

his experience on Hajj in Mecca and how that reshaped his relationship to black nationalism. I think of the father of my teacher, Leopold Weiss, also in Mecca, and how that transformed his relationship to his Jewish tradition. I think of Gaza and its churches and mosques that were there until the recent genocidal war on Gaza. So, I don't know what else to say beyond that – that this experience has existed and has been ongoing for a long time.