

Adam Kirsch

The Great Jewish American Liberal Academic Anti-Anti- Zionist Freak-Out

reprinted from TABLET (Dec. 2, 2014)

***‘The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel’
shows how the boycott movement is more
significant than its achievements suggest***

At the end of last year, the American Studies Association earned more press attention than it has in its entire history by voting to boycott Israeli academic institutions. The effect of the boycott has been devastating—not to Israel, where apparently its sole effect has been to interfere with the dissertation work of one Arab graduate student, but to the ASA itself. Immediately after the vote, hundreds of college presidents and faculty leaders blasted the organization, with several schools withdrawing their membership. This fall, the ASA embarrassed itself by threatening to bar representatives of Israeli universities from its annual convention, only to reverse the decision under the threat of discrimination lawsuits. Its leadership managed to make things even worse by banning Jewish media organizations from the conference, under a press policy one commentator derided as being “as complicated, arbitrary and daunting as getting a press pass for the North Korean Politburo meeting, except that the ASA professes to be a progressive organization devoted to the exchange and dissemination of ideas.”

It would be hard, then, to account the ASA boycott as any kind of

victory for the BDS movement. If anything, the contrast between the ASA's self-righteous blundering and the actual course of events in Israel and Palestine, over the last horrible year, makes the boycott seem not just pointless but obscenely trivial. But the appearance of an important new book, *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*, edited by Cary Nelson and Gabriel Noah Brahm, makes the argument that the academic boycott movement is more significant than its actual achievements suggest. For on every page of this thick anthology, full of essays by American and Israeli academics, you can sense the distress that the BDS campaign has succeeded in provoking in its real target—which is not Israel at all, but Jewish liberals.

The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel is 550 pages long, and it contains, in addition to essays, a dossier of official documents on the ASA and other boycott resolutions, as well as a short history of Israel. It is intelligent and wide-ranging, from David Caplan's essay on the representation of Jews in current American literature to Shira Wolosky's memoir of what it is actually like to teach Arab and Jewish students in an Israeli university. But its core arguments can be summarized in a few paragraphs, since they are obvious and, it seems to me, overwhelming.

First, the boycott of Israeli universities is a violation of academic freedom, since it restricts the ability of scholars to teach and collaborate with colleagues, simply on the basis of national origin. Second, it is counterproductive, since it targets exactly the sector of Israeli society where pro-Palestinian and pro-peace opinion is most flourishing, and where Jews and Arabs are most likely to meet as peers. And third, it is hypocritical, because it singles out Israel for opprobrium while saying nothing about countries whose violations of academic freedom and international law are much worse. Indeed, if they were truly brave, and consistent, the members of the ASA would boycott the United States—which is responsible for far more violence against Arabs and Muslims than Israel—by refusing to teach in any university that receives government funding.

These points are made with force and concision by the essays in the book's first section, "Opposing Boycotts as a Matter of Principle," by writers including Martha Nussbaum, Cary Nelson, and Russell Berman. Drawing on one of her own areas of research, Nussbaum points out that in 2002 the government of the Indian state of Gujarat organized what she calls a "pogrom" and a "genocide" against Muslim citizens; yet no calls for a boycott of Gujarati or Indian universities were heard. "I am not sure there is anything to be said in favor of a boycott of Israeli scholars and institutions that could not be said, and possibly with stronger justification, for similar actions toward the United States and especially India," she writes.

Meanwhile, Berman reminds us that academic freedom is a hard-won privilege, easily trampled by politics, which scholars have an obligation to defend by "resisting the imposition of any political criteria on scholarship, whether the directives are from state legislatures or from professional scholarly organizations." And in his contribution, Nelson shows that such trampling is already taking place in BDS circles, as when Steven Salaita—who himself made news this year, when his appointment to the University of Illinois was revoked over his virulently anti-Israel comments on Twitter—calls for a boycott not just of Israel, but of "individuals who consciously participate in advocacy for the Israeli state." "The new BDS McCarthyism," Nelson writes, "is organized around an implicit question: 'Are you now or have you ever been a Zionist?'"

The weaknesses of the boycott campaign are, in fact, so glaring that it has had little success in imposing its agenda on universities. Notably, the Modern Language Association, a much bigger and more influential group than the American Studies Association, declined to pursue an anti-Israel resolution this summer. Samuel and Carol Edelman offer some statistics in their contribution to the book: "In the 2013-14 academic year, 15 divestment resolutions were introduced in universities in the U.S. Of these, only two passed." Where such resolutions are adopted,

it is usually by student governments with no power to affect university policy; of the six campuses where BDS resolutions passed in 2012-13, “not one ... boycotted, divested, or sanctioned Israel.”

If this is so, the question then becomes, why are the contributors to *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel* so concerned about the issue? The answer is suggested by the Edelmanns’ title, “When Failure Succeeds”: Even when BDS resolutions are inconsequential, they can succeed in changing the parameters of discussion about Israel and Zionism. “What BDS did not fail at,” the Edelmanns write, “was weeks, months, and even years of constant attacks against Israel, portraying it as a pariah nation, an occupier, a human rights violator, a racist nation, and a denier of Palestinian rights. That is significant.”

Whether such language will have a permanent long-term effect on the American people’s sympathy for Israel may be doubted. Students are exposed to a lot of political ideas in college that they seem to have no trouble discarding after graduation. What is certain is that, for Jews who make their lives in intellectual and academic circles, the growing prevalence of anti-Israel discourse is making things very uncomfortable. Looking at the table of contents of *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel* proves the point: Of the book’s 25 contributors, at least 21 seem to be Jewish. Surely there are many non-Jewish academics who would agree that BDS is logically and politically flawed; but, like the vast majority of the ASA membership, they do not seem to care enough about the issue to get deeply involved in it. It is Jewish academics who feel the boycott movement to be a personal threat that demands a vigorous response.

That is because, as a number of essays in the book argue, the BDS agenda is at heart not just pro-Palestinian but anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli, if not actively anti-Semitic. One of the convictions shared by several contributors is that many people sign on to the BDS movement without realizing that it is committed, not to a peaceful two-state solution, but to the end of

Israel as a Jewish state. The official BDS movement website (bdsmovement.net) features the unimpeachable slogan “Freedom Justice Equality,” but when you get to its actual demands, they turn out to be as follows:

1. Ending [Israel’s] occupation and colonization of all Arab lands occupied in June 1967 and dismantling the Wall
2. Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality
3. Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194

Most Americans (and most Israelis) would agree to the second item, and many to the first; but the third, read correctly, means putting an end to Israel as a Jewish state. This is a demand that virtually no Israeli Jews, even the most liberal, would accede to, as the BDS movement knows full well. To include this core demand, then, means that BDS is not about resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but prolonging it, and taking sides in it. It follows that any boycott adopted on these terms can never be withdrawn as long as the Jewish state continues to exist.

For these reasons, many of the essays in *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel* turn out to be about subjects much broader than boycotts: They are about the history of Israel, Zionism, the Jews, and, inevitably, anti-Semitism. In 2002, the President of Harvard, Larry Summers, famously warned that boycotts of Israel were anti-Semitic in effect if not in intent. In their essay, Gabriel Noah Brahm and Asaf Romirowsky reverse this formula, arguing that it is precisely the intent of BDS that is anti-Semitic, even if its effect on most adherents is not to turn them into anti-Semites. Anti-Zionism, they insist, is a form of anti-Semitism, since “when a people is denied its right to self-determination, that’s an attack upon that people, as a people.” By this logic, the very same right that should guarantee the

Palestinians a state in the West Bank should also guarantee the Jews a state in Israel. To fight for one and oppose the other is *ipso facto* hostile to Jews.

Of course, this is not the most dangerous kind of anti-Semitism in the world, and when Jews are being killed in the streets of Paris—and of Jerusalem—it may seem idle to worry about what a few activists are saying in Berkeley and Ann Arbor. Unless, of course, Berkeley or Ann Arbor is where you live. For liberal Jewish academics, especially in the humanities, the demonization of Zionism presents a fundamental challenge to their identity, since it puts their commitment to justice and their commitment to Judaism at odds. And it is notable that almost the entire spectrum of opinion represented in *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel* is liberal, dovish, pro-peace. Here there are no Moshe Feiglins or Naftali Bennetts; the very logic of their Zionism commits these writers to also support a Palestinian homeland.

Ironically, it is Omar Barghouti and Judith Butler, to name two figures frequently rebutted in these pages, who have something in common with Jewish settlers and annexationists. Both sides agree that the Israeli-Palestinian problem is a fight to the death between nationalisms, in which only one side can prevail. Most American Jews, however, cannot countenance the idea that these are the only options. Since Louis Brandeis, we have cherished the conviction that Zionism is not at odds with liberalism, but an expression of liberalism: A movement for national self-determination by one of the world's most oppressed peoples. The danger we are facing today is that, as the Israeli occupation stretches on without an end in sight, the connection of liberalism with Zionism is coming apart. In such a situation, liberal Zionists risk courting the contempt of the left and of the right. But this is a position long familiar to liberals of all kinds; and it requires exactly the kind of moral firmness demonstrated in many of these essays.

Adam Kirsch is a contributing editor for Tablet Magazine and the author

of Benjamin Disraeli, a biography in the Nextbook Press Jewish Encounters book series.