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In **Partners for Progressive Israel & The Jewish Pluralist**

December 10, 2014

Review of Cary Nelson and Gabriel Noah Brahm ed., The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel (Wayne State University Press, 2015)

When the leadership of the American Studies Association (ASA) rammed through a resolution in December 2013 calling for “the boycott of Israeli academic institutions” (with the question of its impact on individual Israeli scholars left murkily ambiguous) it created a furor. Many other academic organizations have faced, or will soon face, academic boycott resolutions. The tactic has been successful in calling attention to the growing BDS movement, and in shedding light on attitudes towards Israel in the academy. Often the resulting image has not been pretty. Opponents of the academic boycott have put together a remarkable, sprawling volume, The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel, edited by Cary Nelson and Gabriel Noah Brahm (Wayne State University Press, 2015), with some 25 essays, over 550 pages, that cover the issue from almost every conceivable angle. Anyone remotely interested in the issue should read it.

The ASA boycott is the immediate catalyst for the volume, and perhaps the first essay to read Sharon Ann Musher’s riveting account of the proceedings at the ASA last December; how the organization’s leaders made a mockery of parliamentary procedures to achieve their desired outcome, and how those in opposition to the resolution were hooted at and venomously attacked. When a friend of mine, attending the ASA meeting, gave me a running account of its kangaroo court proceedings, we were both outraged, and the outrage has not diminished.

There are many reasons to oppose an academic boycott of Israel. A nation’s academic institutions should only be boycotted if there evidence of systematic censorship and suppression of academic freedoms, and this certainly is not the case for Israel. Israeli academic institutions are often at the cynosures of vigorous debate about Israel’s past, present, and future. While ignoring all the ways that Israeli academics have challenged reigning

orthodoxies and shibboleths about Israeli-Palestinian relations, the boycott resolutions would make them all into putative collaborators with the worst aspects of Israeli society and the current Israeli government, singling them out in a way no other country's academic are scrutinized, including, of course, academics from the United States.

Many Israeli academics are in the forefront of creative efforts to work collaboratively with Palestinians and Palestinian academics, as a number of contributors to The Case Against Academic Boycotts point out. To the extent there are free speech pressures on Israeli academics, either from the government or influential right-wing organizations, and there sometimes are, the response should be, of course, to vigorously defend the right of Israeli academics to speak their minds, in Israel or anywhere else, and not as the academic boycotter would do, stigmatize the academic enterprise in Israel as illegitimate.

Most of the arguments for an academic boycott are warmed over versions of the same ultra-left rhetoric that has circulated in the academy for decades. Israel is seen as the highest stage of settler colonialism and *prima facie* illegitimate, to be somehow wished away. In one of the volume's most interesting essays, Alan Johnson calls this "reactionary anti-imperialism," as if sloganeering about Israeli fascism and apostrophe's to "the resistance" can somehow negate 140 years of Zionist and Israeli history. And of course, the brunt of the argument and outrage of the academic boycotters is not directed against the reactionaries (who simply don't register) but liberals and liberal Zionists, all those who believe that Israelis and Palestinians, and the two societies they have created, often deeply flawed societies, have no choice but to find a way to live together. The very notion of "liberal Zionism" is viewed as an impossibility, an insult to the Palestinians, and Israel-Palestinian coexistence reduced to a risible oxymoron.

And most of the essays in The Case Against Academic Boycotts are from a liberal Zionist perspective. And the rise of the academic boycott movement is, among other things, an indication of a crisis within liberal Zionism. The belief that many of us have held for decades, that the contradictions of Zionism can be surmounted, that Israel can create a homeland for the Jewish people while recognizing the legitimate national aspirations of the Palestinians has never been more in doubt. More and more people have come to the conclusion (a false one, I think) that the two-state solution is dead. Instead, with complementary right and left wing versions of the

argument, many argue that a single unitary state is the only way forward. But if a two state solution is, in the current situation, unlikely, the egalitarian bi-national state boycott supporters want is simply impossible. Any way forward now is hard to see. It is hard not to conclude that from any objective analysis, the prospects for peace have never been bleaker, and the prospects for war, intifada, or some other catastrophe have never been more likely. And this is why, in my opinion, the academic boycott movement is thriving, a search for a quick fix and moral certitude in a situation in which the fixes are slow and nothing is certain.

Many of the essays in the volume are very concerned with the connection of the academic BDS movement with anti-Semitism. I have no doubt that many supporters of an academic boycott can be properly so characterized, and that the movement is making it easier for those harboring anti-Semitic thoughts to come out of the closet and express them more openly—here’s looking at you Steven Salaita, whose now notorious tweets, such as “Zionists: Transforming ‘anti-Semitism’ from something horrible to something honorable since 1948” expressed openly what I fear some supporters of an academic boycott genuinely feel. Everyone should look at the anti-Semitism within the BDS movement, especially in Europe, with the gravest of forebodings. But I am less worried than some of the writers in The Case Against an Academic Boycott of Israel the recrudescence of a new anti-Semitism. For me, the tragedy of the current situation is that most supporters of an academic BDS, are not by any reasonable standard, haters of Jews. The BDS movement is growing, in large part, because of the increasing despair that so many share, that a peaceful, negotiated solution to the Israel-Palestine problem has become impossible.

That is to say, what Israel does or does not do will profoundly shape the future of the academic boycott and BDS movement. It is worth remembering that there was a time, from the 1950s through around 1980, when the Arab boycott of Israel had far more serious economic and political consequences than does the current BDS movement. Israel blunted the old BDS movement by signing peace treaties with former enemies and moving, so it seemed at the time, towards resolving its problems with the Palestinians. And I have no doubt that if the prospects for peace improved, the BDS movement would shrivel, leaving only the fanatics. And if someone like Naftali Bennett, a very plausible candidate for the next prime minister of Israel, gets to implement his plans for the annexation of most of the West Bank and

extinguishing the possibility of Palestinian statehood, it would not take a prophet to predict that the BDS movement will greatly gain in strength.

Here's the nub of the problem, as I see it. Israel, backed by the US, is largely impervious to suggestion or moral suasion (including from the US.) In these circumstances, devising ways to put non-violent pressure on Israel to change its policies is an obvious alternative, and for many a necessity. Non-violence, if we remember our Gandhi and King, is not just marching around with placards, but a way of making the dominant power feel uncomfortable, to make those carrying out its policies uneasy and perhaps question and change their roles. In this, there are a range of tactics from strongly stated disapproval on upwards that can be employed. And boycotts, divestment, and sanctions will inevitably be a part of this conversation. It has begun, on a small scale, with the EU enforcing long standing rules about scientific collaboration with Israel on the West Bank, and the move for Palestinian statehood recognition in the US will bring this to a new level. I, personally, support the Palestinian statehood effort, and I for one find targeted economic boycotts of the West Bank, of the sort that might persuade a company not to relocate or do business in the West Bank, as something that is far more focused than a general ban of contact with Israeli academic institutions, which I see as not a way to go Israel to change its policies (what are Israeli academic institutions going to do, set up shop elsewhere?) but simply a way of punishing and anathemizing Israel. And even in the matter of academic boycotts, there are gray areas. One of the contributors to the collection, Robert Fine, strongly opposes an boycott of Israeli academic institutions, while supporting a boycott of Ariel University in the West Bank, something that I approve.

In his preface to [The Case Against an Academic Boycott of Israel](#) Paul Berman argues that those who want “a good boycott and not a bad boycott” will never find what they want. Their search for the perfect nuance is commendable, though I have the feeling that they will never get it right.” This can be perhaps expanded to “good pressure on Israel” vs. “bad pressure on Israel” and I agree with Berman that it probably can never be fully and equitably calibrated. But when it comes to balancing a support for the right of Israelis to shape their own future as they choose, and the right of Palestinians to do the same, there is only nuance, uncertainty, miserable choices, and imponderables. The fact that we never will get it quite right does not absolve us from the need to try.

I am not sure how to best advance towards a peace between Israel and Palestine, or even if a two state solution is possible. (If it happens, it was possible; if it doesn't, it wasn't.) But I know how not advance towards peace. And one of those wrong turns is an academic boycott. We must reject the trendy theories of the academic boycotters that "everything is political." Academic organizations do best when they stick to their main task, advancing knowledge. The history of adding extraneous political agendas to academic organizations have at best a mixed record, with many examples of the damage they can cause (during World War I or the McCarthy period, for instance.)

And the sort of "political" that supporters of "everything is political" boycotters avow is typically disinterested and disdainful in politics as it is actually practiced and exists. And what Israelis and Palestinians desperately need to do is to reinvent "the political" as recognizing the reality of the other side, and recognizing that neither side is going anywhere. In any future move towards peace, there will be much pushing and shoving, and some fighting and biting, but above all there will have to be talking. And this is where the profound anti-intellectualism of the academic boycott movement is most apparent. It devalues talk, seeing it as so just palaver, that everything has been said, and everything is known. And it is only by talk (though of course not only by talk), both inside and outside the academy, by Israelis and Palestinians, and their supporters on all sides, that we will all slowly stumble our way forward. And if The Case Against an Academic Boycott of Israel is depressing in exposing the shrill meanness of the academic boycotters, and the lengths to which they will go to achieve their questionable goals, in its profound commitment to free speech and its necessity, in the United States, in Israel, and in Palestine it is hopeful and inspiring.