

## A Moral Approach to Boycotts and Sanctions

I'd like to argue the moral case for supporting a selective boycott of products from the Occupied West Bank, which argues that it is [illegally held territory](#) in which its prior and current inhabitants (Palestinians, whatever their citizenship) live under a form of military rule which completely privileges settlers and Israeli, justified on fraudulent security grounds. First, I wish to deal with the arguments about the occupation, and then approach the issue from different moral standpoints.

Occupation has created a physical and legal infrastructure set up to permanently disadvantage Palestinians and annex their land and resources. The abuse of human rights and other aspects of the occupation, including the security issue, is well documented by [B'tzelem](#) in its reports and documented through the [Israel Occupation Archive](#), and of course, many progressive Zionists agree with this assessment of the situation and see the Occupation as a threat to Israel's future as a stable country. Many people also argue that the four decades of occupation have created a brutalizing culture within Israeli youth who are called upon to act in oppressive ways, alongside the massive economic distortion created by the Occupation which favours—at the expense of Israelis in Israel proper—the lifestyle of settlers. Thus, the effects on the mentality of young people are seen in the [recent case](#) of the Israel soldier Eden Abergil who saw nothing wrong—and was in fact proud—of photos of bound tortured Palestinians she put on her Facebook page, and organizations such as [Shovrei Shtika](#) have published much evidence of brutal behaviour by men and women soldiers.

If however, you take the view that the Occupation is justified or is in fact legal (which seems to be the position taken by the Jewish Community Council of Victoria in a recent [press release](#)), or that the Palestinians have no right to be there or that they should not enjoy real equality as distinct from legal fictions, then this article is not for you. If you don't want to experience discomfort and prefer to ignore the problem, this article is not for you. If question the morality of the occupation and if whether non-violent boycotts or sanctions are justified as a form of protest, then read ahead.

The argument is frequently put those who are critical of the BDS movement that there needs to be an 'even handed approach' to the problem of violence, or that that in fact, Palestinians in the territories or Israel enjoy greater rights under a benign form of occupation; or that people have greater rights and opportunities than Arabs in other countries. In fact, the call for 'balance' covers up the total imbalance of power and force of arms in which Palestinians, far more than Israelis are the victims of violence, not to speak of physical dispossession. By focussing insisting that has to be 'equivalence', the totally imbalanced nature of brute Israeli force and the use of state power to physically alter the West Bank through checkpoints, roads, tunnels, surveillance systems and so on is hidden. Even the use of statements about Palestinians who claim to suffer economically because of boycotts is completely out of character with the overwhelming Palestinian consensus to sever links with [occupation products and services](#) even though it can undoubtedly cause hardship.

And in addition, the view is put that the focus on Israel approaches the pathological and irrational, revealing deep anti-Semitic motivation when there are far worse injustices going on in the world that serve attention, particularly in Muslim countries (e.g. Darfur). The answer to this, at least from my perspective is that Israel is MY concern, because first, it includes and claims part of my identity and loyalty; and second, from a political perspective, Israeli claims to be an effective democracy,

which I argue it is not. For many non-Jews, the Israel-Palestine problem is critical because it is seen as an international flashpoint whose non-resolution also has flow on effect internationally.

Another reason used to discredit boycotts is that it is seen to be irretrievably and deliberately intrinsically linked to a desire to dismantle the 'Jewish state' and its replacement with something else, whether one or two states. My answer to this that questions about the character of Israel whether as a 'Jewish state', a secular state with a Jewish majority or something else have been around as long as I can remember and that the current BDS campaign has picked up on this issue—with all its negative implications as part of its anger with the nature of Israel's behaviour. As long as Israel is engaged in creating facts of oppression on the ground its political enemies are going to look for any conceptual and verbal ammunition that they can, offensive as it can be. This is not to say that all BDS supporters are like this, but in the war of words, the loudest shout dominates.

Back to the reality of occupation. [Mustafa Bargouti](#), a Palestinian activist has described the effect of the occupation as follows, and we hear it time and time again from intelligent Palestinians who object to being treated as prisoners in their own land. Bargouti is also a severe critic of the Palestinian Authority.

I am an elected Member of Parliament. I ran for president in Palestine; I was second in the presidential race [for the Palestinian Authority]. I was born in Jerusalem. I worked as medical doctor, as a cardiologist, in a very important hospital in Jerusalem for 15 years. And since five years I am prevented, like 98 percent of the Palestinians, from entering Jerusalem. If I am caught in Jerusalem, I could be sentenced to seven years in jail.

There are a number of ways to approach the problem of the occupation and the denial of the right of self-determination from a moral point of view.

This first is a universal human rights approach, reflected in UN principles and [international law](#) which is opposed to such things as military occupation or land seizures, of the denial of affective legal remedies against oppression, and second, from the position within the Jewish tradition. The universal point of view is one put by many governments, churches, NGOs and many individuals we see in the letter pages who do not have a problem with the existence of Israel within internationally-recognized and defined boundaries, but rather, they oppose the politics of occupation. It also obviously underpins the thinking of many on the left or in the Palestinian movement, though that can be coupled with various degrees of tolerance or otherwise about the validity about Israel, Zionism, Jewish claims to Palestine, the character of a Jewish state as an inherently unequal ethnocracy and so on.

Notwithstanding the spectrum of viewpoints, it is presented as inherently 'anti-Israel/anti-Semitic' by opponents of sanctions or boycotts in numerous websites or in print. The tactic of labelling all critics bar a tame few as extremists is also used to argue that the position is also '[delegitimizing Israel](#)', whether intentionally or through naïveté, thus providing more ammunition to harm the enemies of Israel.

Thus, AJDS has been dumped in with the 'deligitimizers' by the so-called official leadership even though AJDS has indicated its disagreement with many elements of the BDS campaign and the positions it takes on not just the Occupied Territories beyond the Green Line, but within the Green

Line itself. Thus, those who have seen the countless of posts by me in Facebook of late know that I have been vigilant in attacking anti-Israel extremists, whose views are [Judeophobic](#). I also see it as part of my responsibility to equally raise consciousness among Palestinian supporters to raise their consciousness about the complex nature of Jews, Judaism, and Zionism in the hope that their views will be moderated and a bridge between communities constructed.

Thus, I do not endorse a BDS position which crudely blocks economic, social and cultural exchange between Israel and the rest of the world. Tactically, BDS is engaging in actions that only cause bad reactions. Too often Israelis and Diaspora Jews react badly to provocative language and pontificating analysis of 'the Jewish question' which set off warning bells, based on historical experience. This only serves to muffle the message and give voice to those who oppose change at all costs.

Thus, much as some BDS rhetoric or activity (sometimes tied up in the theatre of modern protest) may make its protagonists feel good and vindicated, strong and blaming language that resonates with historical tropes and images (certainly exploited by anti-Semitic elements) can serve to achieve an opposite effect on an ethnically-conservative community raised in a situation of polarization and a sense of victimhood. Bringing along Israelis and Diaspora Jews in the struggle to liberate both communities from the evils caused by the Occupation is, as far as I am concerned, a key step to resolving one of the world's most intractable conflicts. Separating issues in Israeli proper from the Occupation in the West Bank is one place to start, because many Israelis would agree that the West Bank is a burden. Making more Israelis aware of the evils caused by the Occupation is a good place to start .

Furthermore, the tactic of community 'leaders' to claim that proponents of boycotts are all 'delegitimizers' is in fact a way of turning attention away from the Occupation. A perusal of strategy documents coming out of hasbarah organizations such as the [Re'ut Institute](#) or other 'defensive' organizations (I suspect made available locally, given the similarity in language used), makes it very clear that they utilize common strategies to turn around the issue and defend the status quo and deflect criticism as much as possible. As an academic, it is remarkable to see how much effort is put into delegitimizing both Israelis and particularly American Jews who hold strong opinions about Israel and Zionism, and particularly those who have distanced themselves entirely from Zionism (See in particular, the hatchet job done by Seliktar 'Tenured Radicals' in Israel: From New Zionism to Political Activism Israel Affairs, Vol.11, No.4, October 2005, pp.717–736; or [Alvin H. Rosenfeld](#). ['Progressive' Jewish Thought and the New Anti-Semitism](#) but a counter analysis from a loyalist critical Israel perspective. Also [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Zionism#Diversity\\_of\\_anti-Zionism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Zionism#Diversity_of_anti-Zionism))

However, it is much harder for 'community leadership' to so easily dismiss arguments from a Jewish moral perspective. Progressive Jewish views about the value and morality of social action has influenced the views of Jews (including Zionists for at least the past century) and even Jewish humanists like myself grown up in the shadow of the tradition of such thinkers and activists. The concern even affects Jews who argue that while they take a post-Zionist viewpoint, they still have a moral duty to speak out (this is a position developed by [Judith Butler](#) for example). However, the Jewish right gives little credibility to such forms of intellectual dissent casting them as effectively providing succour to the enemy through their de facto questioning of the traditional Zionist position or leadership role of both the Israeli government and its mouthpiece organizations abroad.

Second, the Jewish social justice view can be summarized as the principle of *Tikkun Olam* derived from the Mishnah, which is the struggle to repair or install righteousness in the world, as well as inspirational mottos like “*Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof*” (Justice, Justice you shall pursue”, Devarim 16:20). This also relates to the concept of ethical *mitzvot*, for both religious and non-religious Jews alike; obligations to make the world a better place, including challenging authority, which traditional Judaism appears reluctant to do. Unfortunately, this tradition barely exists in Australia, with attempts to stomp out dissent on issues relating to Israel going back many decades.

At least in the US, where I had a formative experience in learning about it—and never enough experience in participating in it—there is a tradition of speaking and acting by rabbis and ordinary people alike, because sometimes, speaking out, even in a symbolic way, is a way of raising consciousness about problems. And in particular, consciousness amongst people is a step to correcting injustice, challenging as taking steps can be. This tradition is absent locally.

Some specific examples which brought Jews into conflict with the established views and practices of other Jews in the US and Israel (as an absorber of American culture), reflecting this experience:

- [Rabbi Samuel Korff](#) of the Boston Beit Din developed halachic rulings to support, the boycott of produce such as grapes and lettuce in supermarkets to support the rights of underpaid farmworkers in the US, as part of a massive successful boycott campaign in the US. Korff He was also responsible for the denunciation of banking practices, tacitly supported by the Jewish community and sleazy slumlords who used the cover of piety to engage in practices which resulted in which resulted in ‘white flight’ and the impoverishment of communities. His moral stance was influential in the Boston community at large, amongst other Jewish denominations, secular Jews, and the wider public.
- [Rabbi Joshua Heschel](#) who is revered by many Christians and Jews in the US his activity in the Civil Rights movement in the US, was close to Martin Luther King, and he supported the boycott movement of segregated facilities in the South, along with many other Jews. He also opposed the war in Vietnam. There is a wonderfully evocative photo of him marching in solidarity with Martin Luther King and others in the March on Selma Alabamba
- More recently, [Rabbi Arthur Waskow](#), of the Philadelphia-based Shalom Center, has supported the establishment of a Mosque at ‘Ground Zero’ in New York, and he has also taken a strong stand on Israeli politics. Waskow has been active in the Reconstructionist movement for decades.
- As far back as 1902 in the US, there have been boycotts of criminal practices in the kosher meat industry. Most recently, the Rubashkin family’s [Agriprocessors](#) kosher meat and family members have been sentenced to long criminal convictions, for such things as using child labor and was subject to boycotts by Orthodox social justice activists.
- And of course, the number of secular Jews who may or may not have had particular religious conviction but who have felt a moral imperative, combing their heritage with a political viewpoint to speak out on all sorts of matters of injustice in many countries is of legion. For example, [Saul Alinsky](#), coming out of an Orthodox background, while working

with other ethnic groups and especially social-justice movers and shakers in the Catholic Church in Chicago, developed powerful and highly influential organizing techniques including non-violent grass-roots community action and boycotts, and Jews have been active in many other causes including the labour movement or anti-racism movement. Of course, there are attempts today even claim such people are merely 'political Jews' when it comes to their opposition in various ways to Israeli politics, but this vastly oversimplifies the complexities of ethnic and cultural identity in a free society.

- Within Israel and the diaspora, there are also such organizations [as Rabbis for Human Rights](#) which are clearly Zionist, or Shovrei Shtika but take a strong moral position on the immoral situation in which Israel is involved in the territories. [Yehuda Shaul](#) one of Shovrei Shtika's founders is observant. And of course, whether the Jewish Community Council likes it or not, Zionist organizations such as the New Israel Fund are also opposed to the Occupation.

Thus, most recently, Jewish moral activists have acted directly in the face of acquiescence by other Jewish organizations such as AIPAC or the Christian Zionist lobby that reflect the push of money and power or influence to mute criticism of (look at what happened to Goldstone over Gaza, and the frothings from such people as Alan Dershowitz) Yet this stance still brings from harsh and shrill denunciations who try to tie critics in with Nazi boycotters and such like.

Returning to to the current attacks on the Australian Jewish Democratic Society for suggesting the most modest form of boycott against products from the West Bank. I suggest that people in AJDS who are supporting a limited boycott are coming out of the moral position I have outlined. To claim that the moral position we take-- that some form of non-violent action against the Occupation, in line with a longstanding tradition, albeit a minority one, in the Jewish community internationally of protesting against justice close to home (in this case the 'Jewish national home') —assists with the existential threat to Israel, or that it delegitimizes the country, or that we are playing into the hands of our enemies and crass anti-Semites is an insult to the intelligence of thinking people who care about the future of Israel.

This position I support is a far cry from some of the rhetoric and actions taken (not always with the nicest of motives) by the Boycott Sanctions and Divestment Movement, including a number other Jewish organizations that support a full boycott. As the current campaign by the neo-fascist [Im Tirzu](#) organization demonstrates, academic freedom is under internal threat in Israel and needs to be defended. Israel academic institutions (particularly in the humanities) are the last thing that supporters of full sanctions and boycotts should be going after. Better expose the Israeli military Research and Development complex as part of the international arms trade- supported by great democracies like Belgium or Sweden--rather boycott struggling Departments of Assyriology.

I care deeply about the future security of Israel, but I know that its future cannot be linked to 43 of its 60 years as an occupier and thief of another's birthright. Indicating that putting a 'Made in Israel' label on something from the West Bank is morally wrong and asserting that we not buy such products is the right thing to do.





