

Is BDS the Way to End the Occupation?

ON MAY 11, 2010, *TIKKUN* HOSTED A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION AMONG PEACE activists on the issue of boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS). A transcription of their lively debate—edited for space and clarity—appears below. We invite you to join this important discussion by continuing the conversation on our website and on the Tikkun Daily blog (www.tikkun.org/daily).

Rabbi Michael Lerner (ML): We've convened this roundtable discussion because we at *Tikkun* are aware that the various movements and people engaged in the struggle for peace in the Middle East and who seek reconciliation between Israel and Palestine are increasingly divided over the issue of boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS). What we all share in this discussion is the desire to bring peace and justice to the people of Israel and the people of Palestine. We also share a belief that the violence and the suffering on both sides must end and that one important step in that direction is to end the Occupation of the West Bank by Israel, though that is only part of the solution. So today, we're not here to explore the suffering on both sides, though that provides the backdrop to this conversation. Instead, we're asking, "What are the most effective strategies to end the Occupation and to move toward peace, justice, and reconciliation between these two peoples, and how does BDS contribute or not to that process?"

Rebecca Vilkomerson (RV): I want to thank you, Rabbi Lerner, and to thank the *Tikkun* community for giving us the opportunity to have this conversation. I think it's a real model for exactly the kind of conversations we should be having in all sorts of forums within the Jewish community about boycotts, divestment, and sanctions—the BDS movement.

We in Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) recognize that BDS has been used as a tool of all kinds of righteous social justice movements over time. JVP defends the right of activists to use the full range of BDS tactics without being persecuted or demonized. We practice one such use of BDS: the divestment from and boycott of companies that profit from Israel's occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. That would include companies operating in occupied Palestinian territory, exploiting Palestinian labor, participating in providing materials or labor for settlements, exploiting environmental resources, producing military or other equipment, and helping to enforce the Occupation. We have come to this position out of a real sense of frustration—not to say despair—that after forty-three years of occupation and decades of "a peace process" there's been no improvement in the situation and things have gotten simply progressively worse on the ground.

BDS is a nonviolent tactic against the daily violence of the Occupation. It's a time-honored tactic that's been used in our own civil rights struggles in the United States, in the grape boycott organized by the United Farmworkers Union under the leadership of Cesar Chavez, in India's struggle for independence from the British led by Gandhi, and of course in South African apartheid days. It's a legitimate tactic and a way of holding Israel accountable to human rights standards and international law. There are a growing number of Israeli groups who are asking the allies of peace around the world to join in this boycott, in support of the Palestinians who are calling for this help from civil society. Many of the participants in the

ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

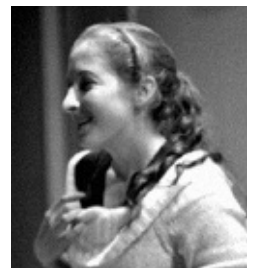
(in order of appearance)



Rebecca Vilkomerson
Executive Director of
Jewish Voice for Peace



Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb
Cofounder of the Shomer
Shalom Network for Jewish
Nonviolence



Maya Wind
Israeli Shminitsi
(Conscientious Objector)



Jeremy Ben-Ami
President of J Street

TOP TO BOTTOM: COURTESY OF REBECCA VILKOMERSON, COURTESY OF RABBI LYNN GOTTLIEB, ELLEN DAVIDSON, COURTESY OF JEREMY BEN-AMI



UC Berkeley's student government debated whether to divest from companies profiting from Israel's Occupation of the Palestinian territories this spring. Above, Jewish and Muslim members of the university's Students for Justice in Palestine hold nametags in support of divestment (recreated below for clarity). The motion, which gained support from Noam Chomsky and Desmond Tutu, was passed but vetoed.

Another Jew for Justice for Human Rights. Divest from the Israeli Occupation!
Dan, Chicago

Another Human Being for Human Rights. Divest from the Israeli Occupation!
Cindy, Colorado Springs

Another Jew whose extended family died in Europe's camps for Human Rights. Divest from the Israeli Occupation!
Adrienne, Seattle

COURTESY OF JEWISH VOICE FOR PEACE

boycott movement are Jewish, so this is a legitimate part of the Jewish community. It may not be the mainstream part, but it is a growing part.

Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb (LG): I have been involved in Israeli/Palestinian conflict transformation for about forty years, since 1966. I've had deep and enduring relationships with the Israeli peace community as well as the Palestinian peace community. I have watched, over the years, a whole variety of strategies devoted to ending military occupation, curtailing violence from suicide bombs and rockets, and ending the Occupation. During this period I have seen public and private negotiations, U.S. presidents sending high-level representatives to try to bridge the differences between the sides, dialogue groups, and mostly what I would call symbolic demonstrations—people gathering in the street to express their will—and after forty years I have seen the situation deteriorate.

When we talk about ending the Occupation we have to be especially mindful of the context: there is an ongoing and increasingly systematic violence targeted against Palestinian nonviolent movements, appropriation of Palestinian land and water, and decreasing freedom of movement—all this has increased exponentially during the processes of peacemaking. As a person committed to nonviolence for my entire life and the Torah of nonviolence, I

also believe that one should continually reevaluate the effectiveness of any strategy used to reduce violence. Dialogue and negotiations have not been successful. Talks and the use of the U.S. as a supposedly “honest broker” between the parties have not worked.

Palestinian society and individuals and groups in Israeli society are now calling upon us to use a time-honored strategy that is designed to target corporations, institutions, and individuals who profit from the Occupation by earning money from making and manufacturing either the instruments of occupation—which is in the security industry—and/or profiting on lands that have been expropriated illegally from Palestinians. These are the subject of boycott, divestment, and sanctions. There is no other way to engage corporations, institutions, and organizations that are profiting without applying pressure, and this works because it creates a partnership that depends on international work. It is not exclusive of the fine efforts of negotiation and/or lobbying, but neither negotiations nor lobbying will be effective without the international and grassroots partnership of individuals who are working in this way.

Maya Wind (MW) [calling into the roundtable from Israel]: I can say a few things sort of as a representative of the *Shministim* movement in Israel (composed of teenagers who refused induction into the Israel Defense Forces in protest of the Occupation). It's important for me to start out by saying that we've had many discussions within the refusal movement in Israel about BDS, and as of now we don't as a group call for it or oppose it—we don't have an official stance. So I'll speak for myself, but a lot of things I will be saying do represent ideas that are common among many in the broader refusal movement in Israel.

As to the *Shministim*, while we are Israelis and our statement of refusal to take part in the military was not only challenging Israeli society and trying to stimulate a different internal Israeli discourse, it was also very much turned to the international community. A lot of our focus as a refusal movement is toward the world, which expresses the sense we have that it's not just up to the Israeli society to bring peace.

In fact, Israeli society is not moving toward peace but rather further away from it, so many of us look to the international community to play a central role in bringing an end to the Occupation and bringing peace.

I think the refusers generally feel that we cannot struggle against the Occupation using the tools or playing by the rules of the occupying forces—you know, the government, the army. Economic activism like BDS is nonviolent, and it's not playing by the rules; it's using a very different tool. We believe in nonviolence because it can be effective. This kind of economic activism is used everywhere, and why shouldn't it be used here in relationship to Israel and the Occupation as well? Often we discuss at great length within the refusal movement: “What does *refusal* refer to?” Refusal could be a much broader term. Our

refusal to be drafted is one thing, but as Israelis what else can we do to refuse to take any sort of part in the Occupation? As Israelis we can't fully engage in BDS as long as we're paying taxes, for example. We discussed: "Should we as a refusal movement call to not pay taxes to the government? Should we refuse to buy products from Israel?" Living in Israel, our ability to engage in BDS is limited. But personally I fully advocate BDS and yes, I and many other of the refusers would certainly be among those Israelis that Rebecca mentioned before who are also calling to the world to boycott us in Israel.

Jeremy Ben-Ami (JBA): Where we start is with a shared deep desire to end the Occupation, to achieve a two-state solution in which the two peoples who have a claim to this one land are able to find peace and security and find a homeland for themselves and for each other in two states, not in one.

We in the J Street movement are very concerned by the views of some of those who are using BDS tactics, and I don't cast aspersions on anyone today in this conversation or on everybody who uses the BDS tactics, but there is a sense in large parts of the BDS movement that there may not be a legitimacy to a State of Israel that is the homeland of the Jewish people.

We in J Street start in our thinking about how to end the Occupation, how to achieve a two-state solution, by reaffirming the principle that Israel has a right to exist as a homeland for Jewish people, that it has an obligation both morally and legally to provide equal rights for all of those who are *citizens* of Israel, and that the only way that Israel will be able to survive as that democratic and Jewish home over the long run is if there is a Palestinian state living alongside it.

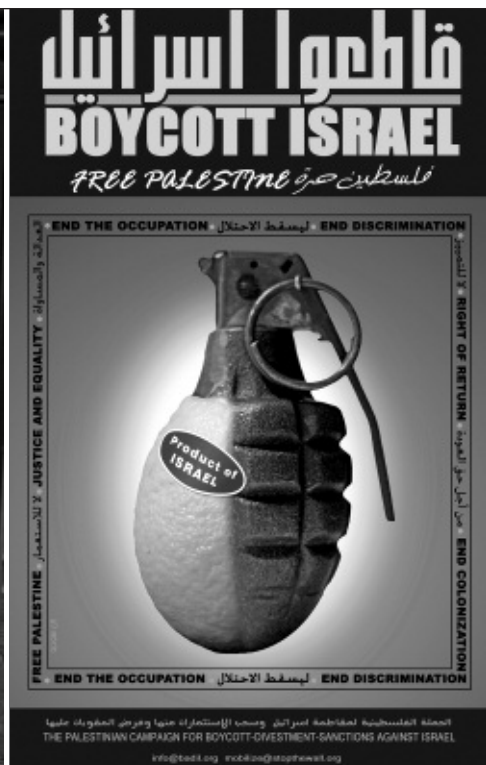
J Street's challenge to those who are using the BDS tactics is not over the tactics. I mean the tactics themselves are neutral—there's nothing inherently wrong or right with any particular tactic. The question is whether or not those tactics are effective and what framing the tactic is being used in. I have not found that BDS efforts are being presented in a way that is in any way supportive of Israel and its right to exist. One can be opposed to Israel's behavior and its policies, and to the particular policies of this particular government, and to the blockade of Gaza, and to the occupation of the West Bank, and to the expansion of the settlements—all of those are things that we at J Street oppose. But the question is, is the BDS critique being framed in a way that allows some to conclude that there is no need for an Israel or that there wouldn't be any great loss if there were just to be one state? That is where our red line is: it's not about the use of the particular tactic; it's the frame of the campaign and the way in which this is being presented.

I am deeply afraid—as somebody who loves Israel, whose family is there, and who has spent a lot of time there—I'm deeply afraid that the way that Israel behaves and the policies that it is following over the next few years and into the next generation are going to lead to Israel becoming a pariah state, to it becoming delegitimized by virtue of its actions. I'm very concerned about that, and to me the key is, how do we get it to change its actions?

I don't think that attacking Israel by boycotting, divesting, engaging in protests, preventing its ambassador from speaking, preventing academics from going places, and not buying



All four participants in this roundtable oppose Israel's Occupation (evoked by this 2009 photo of an Israeli soldier's weapon in front of Palestinians protesting Israel's separation wall). But the participants have different visions about the most viable route toward bringing it to an end.



The BDS movement comprises a variety of organizations and voices. Some only seek to disinvest from firms that, like Caterpillar, are believed to have produced tractors to the specifications of the IDF (Israeli army)—tractors used to destroy Palestinian homes (right). Others seek a more general boycott of Israel (center), while yet others focus on boycotting anything produced in the occupied territories. At left: BDS graffiti on an ad for the Swedish clothing company H&M, which is opening stores in Israel.

When discussing “the BDS movement,” it is important to distinguish among the various elements and organizations, just as we needed to do in the West, for example, in distinguishing different elements in the anti-war or civil rights movements.

products from Israel is going to encourage Israelis to think that there’s an atmosphere in which they can make peace.

I think these behaviors on the part of people opposed to the Occupation only feed into a mentality and an atmosphere in which people circle the wagons and become more defensive. And in fact they argue: “The entire world is against us. How can we make concessions for peace when everybody’s against us?”

The types of tactics that are being used only feed into that mentality and make it more plausible to argue that in fact the world is ganging up on Israel. I know that it is counterintuitive, because the tactics are being used because of the very behaviors that Israel’s engaging in. But it’s all a vicious cycle, and I’m afraid that this set of tactics feeds rather than helps to halt that vicious cycle.

Rabbi Gottlieb said that after forty years of being involved in attempts at the peace movement and negotiations and two-state solutions and all of that, that she’s given up a little bit of hope and so have a lot of people. But I don’t see an alternative, and I think we need to double down on our movement to try to get particularly President Obama to be deeply and actively engaged to outline what a solution is and to make it clear that Israelis and Palestinians have to make some choices now about where they’re at and what they’re going forward to do. Only with American leadership and only in the next couple of years can we stop the situation from becoming irreversible, which really in the long run, for those of us who care about Israel, would mean the end of Israel as we know it.

LG: We all believe in respectful dialogue, which is a matter of grace and civility, and so thank you for that because we all know that talking about issues outside of the accepted or conventional notions of what the peace movement should look like evokes incredible disdain and actually—as Rabbi Lerner very well knows—death threats, loss of jobs, the withdrawal of monies such as is happening in San Francisco to organizations that have a different point of view. So I think that the fact that we can sit at a roundtable and have a respectful conversation and call on our community, the Jewish community, to have such respectful conversations and roundtables is an important accomplishment.

I believe BDS is a sign of hope. It is not taken up out of despair or the feeling that nothing is working. It is one element of ten thousand flowers—let them all bloom—which include pressuring the United States, working in the international community, etc. I believe that BDS is a form of pressure which has a historical track record, which the Jewish community itself has used on many occasions, including the outbreak

of World War II—*l'havdil*, of course, not to equate the two—but the Jewish community has used BDS itself. So I would not characterize it as a lack of hope. I would say it is simply the next phase in this struggle. As Jeremy himself said, if we truly are at the end of a process that in two or three years will take us to a very different dimension if it hasn't already, then BDS should be looked at as a positive influence to apply pressure where none has worked up till now.

RV: I very much agree with what Lynn just said. I find BDS to be the most hopeful thing that's happened in recent years. I was still living in Israel during the Gaza war and during the elections after that, and it was one of the most despairing times that I can remember. The BDS strategy brought Israeli and Palestinian activists together, and it made activists in both communities feel that there is a way to start to transform the current situation, which otherwise seemed hopeless.

I want to ask Jeremy Ben-Ami about the recent Berkeley divestment resolution because you talked, Jeremy, about your fears that boycott was being used to attack Israel and to say it didn't have a right to exist. The Berkeley divestment resolution was a very carefully crafted resolution that simply asked the university to divest from two American military companies that are supporting the continuing Occupation, which is a recognized illegal occupation. I know that J Street is against the Occupation and is against the expansion of settlements, and yet J Street took a position against that divestment resolution at Berkeley along with a long list of other organizations, including the David Project and the Anti-Defamation League and Stand With Us, which have been quite extreme in their tactics and rhetoric. What was your reasoning to oppose a resolution like that, that is so targeted and in no way challenges the right of Israel to exist but simply challenges the Occupation?

JBA: Well I think it was a sin of omission rather than commission. I would agree that the bill was drafted in a way to limit it to the two companies. But I wonder whether it wouldn't have been possible to reaffirm somewhere in the "whereas" clauses that Israel has a right to exist, that there is a historic right to a Jewish home. In these kinds of resolutions there should be affirmation of the right of Israel to exist and of a state of Palestine and a Palestinian home, to live side by side in peace and security. That kind of an introductory paragraph would, to my mind, be a very important step in the right direction. I think that it would be helpful for there to be indications that while the Occupation and the treatment of Gazans and settlement expansion are all bad things, a resolution like that should also indicate that the use of terror and the use of rockets and all of the violence that has been used in the past against Israel are bad things too. A resolution like this would have to have more balance and it would have to indicate that there's not just one side to the story. For the record, J Street will not be signing on to letters with organizations like that in group settings again. I won't comment on going backward, but I will just say going forward you won't find us signing on to letters like that.

RV: Well, I appreciate hearing that very much.

ML: Apart from it being a good feeling for those who have been engaged in the movement to be able to come up with a tactic that feels like "We are doing something," which is of course important for the people in the movement, is there any reason to believe that this is an effective strategy?

MW: As an Israeli activist, I can attest to the fact that Israelis freak out when people talk about BDS, and certainly they do tend to get very defensive. And it kind of plays to the whole narrative that anyway is so strong here, about how "the whole world is against us; we're in an existential threat forever."

I would argue, however, that the alternative that you pose of having Obama or the U.S. administration push Israel along in changing its policies does a similar thing. I mean, if you go around the West Bank, there's countless signs of Obama with a kaffiyeh, "Hussein Obama," "Danger to the Jews," and even just today on the radio, I heard Ehud Barak say very clearly, "Jerusalem, both east and west, is the capital of the Jewish people. We will do with it as we please. The U.S. and Obama can say what they want via recommendations, and we will listen, but it's our country and it's our right." And I think there's a lot of discourse in Israel right now about our autonomy, which of course is a joke, because we get so much in subsidies

COMMUNITY OF
YES



CHORUS OF
NO

J Street rejects what it sees as the negativity of the current BDS movement, as illustrated in its graphic above. The group seeks a positive approach centered on pressuring the U.S. government to push Israel toward peace.



Tikkun has always held that each side needs to understand the emotional suffering, as well as the explanatory narratives, of the other side. The Birthright Unplugged program (above) works mainly with North Americans, many of them Jews, traveling with them to the West Bank, Occupied East Jerusalem, and Israel. They also attempt video conference calls with people trapped in Gaza. Their goal is to offer firsthand experiences in these areas and access to conversations with Palestinian people about their histories, concerns, aspirations, and work. Birthright Unplugged supports Palestinian-led nonviolent campaigns, including the BDS movement, that seek to pressure Israel to comply with international law.

from the U.S. But still, a lot of Israelis are talking about how it's important to stand strong and be independent and not let the U.S. decide for us, because we're not their fifty-second state or whatever. So I would argue that it also contributes a very negative and defensive response from Israelis, probably no less than BDS.

To answer your question, Rabbi Lerner, about its effectiveness, I do think it's effective, for several reasons. For one, a lot of people—both in Israel and probably in the U.S. as well—feel very fed up with the government and big businesses, and all these other CEOs that sort of run the show. And I feel that BDS makes people feel that it's a very down-to-earth, everyone-can-do kind of thing, everyone can stop buying certain products or shop elsewhere, and I think it's effective in that sense—it's a very grassroots sort of thing, it's a thing for the masses to take part in and

feel like it's a very effective, direct action that they are directly involved in; it's not an indirect thing of trying to affect a government to affect another government to affect a situation.

LG: I also want to talk about the ethical dimension of BDS. I would not describe BDS as making us feel better per se, because we are in a struggle for lives and for the future and there is an ethical dimension of noncooperation which is part of the refusal movement, in which even from a kosher point of view one is not allowed to profit or benefit from any products that are either created by exploited labor or through the use of violence. So, from an ethical Jewish point of view, I believe we have an obligation to look at noncooperation, *omets lesarev*, the courage to refuse to cooperate with the products and outcomes of occupation. That is a religious obligation for me, which I take very seriously.

No one who engages in nonviolent struggle knows the outcome of the struggle. There is a level at which one does things because we are ethically called to do them.

And we have a history of success stories, so the idea that BDS is not successful, I think, is contradicted by the very successful history of the use of boycotts by communities of struggle from the United States to South Africa to Europe, throughout the world. So I think it is really up to those who are opposing BDS to show that actually their methods have a hope of success. I would propose that those seeking peace between Israel and Palestine and using different strategies should form a partnership; we should see our work as a partnership, not as "either this or that," but something that we're doing together.

ML: Some who question the effectiveness of BDS in this particular struggle point out that it has only been an effective strategy when proposed in countries where the majority already opposes a given evil reality and is seeking a way to change that reality. If we go to apartheid, for example, in the 1980s, the overwhelming majority of people across the political spectrum, from Reagan on leftward, all believed that apartheid was wrong and articulated that publicly but disagreed about what was the most effective strategy, with Reagan saying "economic and political engagement will give the U.S. more clout to pressure South Africa" and we at *Tikkun* and many others in the movement to end apartheid saying BDS would be more effective. But that opposition to the reality of the Occupation does not yet exist in the U.S. in regard to Israel/Palestine. In fact, a recent poll in May 2010 shows that when asked who they believe is at fault or more at fault for the problems in the Middle East, 80 percent of Americans said that Israel was less at fault and the Palestinians were more at fault. Without that background condition, attempts at BDS only demonstrate how isolated and powerless the peace movement is, not how powerful and potentially effective. That, at least, is one argument that needs to be addressed.

LG: Let me respond in two ways. First of all, the anti-apartheid struggle was a forty-year

movement. That's important to know. If you look generationally at where BDS is in this country, you will see, and I think Jeremy can attest to this from the J Street conference, that younger members of the Jewish community, for instance, are much more inclined to adopt BDS than the elders are.

Number two, I hesitate to use the word "evil." I don't want to use that word because I think we need to continue to humanize each other and refrain from a demonization process, and I believe that we are at a point when a country—which is called the Jewish State, so therefore I feel implicated—can drop white phosphorus bombs, which burn into the skin and are not put out by water, on innocent civilians with impunity, and can take land with impunity, and occupy with impunity. And those of us who have been eyewitnesses to this for the last forty years (as everyone here knows very well) can document the Jewish-only roads, the growth of the settlements, administrative detention, the use of torture, and so forth and so on, and see that this is systematic. It is not occasional or in response to one specific incident, but a systematic oppression.

If you look at the population numbers between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, you have a population that is under siege. Therefore, those of us who want to see a two-state solution, we are duty-bound, I believe, to respond to the call of the targeted population.

We are not in a balanced situation. No Palestinian can go into the home of an Israeli activist, take their computers, lock them up, and throw away the key. We are in a situation where one side has extreme power over the other side. Therefore, in this particular situation, the targeted population—and I'm not saying that there's not suffering on both sides or that rocket-shooting is not wrong and does not deserve to be condemned as a war crime, that has to be stated clearly—but the population targeted for systematic oppression is calling upon the international community to partner with it for the sake of ethics and morality. The majority of Palestinians also want a two-state solution. At this point in the struggle, those of us who would like to see that happen—for love of Israel and love of Palestine and love of humanity and love of future generations of children who will grow up without worrying about death and destruction—for those reasons, we are employing boycott, divestment, and sanctions against corporations.

JBA: I just worry about how to create the atmosphere that we need in order for there to be a mutually agreed-upon and negotiated resolution to this conflict. We need an atmosphere of trust, an atmosphere of understanding that there are very, very painful sacrifices to be made on both sides.

The Palestinian people will have to give up the notion that they can return to the homes that they had to flee in 1948 and that their grandparents and parents fled. Israelis are going to have to pull back their cousins and country-mates from settlements on the West Bank; they're going to have to share Jerusalem. There is going to be painful compromise required on both sides and there is going to be a need to provide a sense of assurance around security, that this is going to work, that people on both sides are committed to each other and committed to this happening. And my concern continues to be that the tone of BDS and the tone of some of the remarks even in this conversation do tend to point the finger at only one side, and tend to lay blame exclusively in one place, and are not helpful to creating that atmosphere. And that in fact they do the reverse—they make people dig in and they make it less likely that there is any hope of a nonviolent end to this conflict.

I still didn't hear from any of the other three folks an affirmation of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish home, with equal rights for all its citizens and a state of Palestine side by side. I'd like to hear that that is a fundamental tenet of the BDS movement and of those who use the tactics,



Jeremy Ben-Ami argues that pressure on the Obama administration—not divestment pressure on multinational companies—will eventually bring Israel to the peace table. Here, Ben-Ami (at right, partially blocking Rahm Emanuel from view) and other Jewish leaders meet with Obama in July 2009.

that Israel has a right to exist, and I haven't heard that.

So, is there a fundamental tenet of this movement that the right resolution is two states, not one? And is there any sense that the BDS movement should be part of a broader socially responsible investing movement? I mean the issue of whether or not corporations follow the highest principles and morality: that applies to how corporations act all over the place. I mean, BP in the Gulf or military contractors who are profiting off wars all over the globe, and those who supplied the people in Sri Lanka, which led to tens of thousands of deaths at the end of that civil war. There's a range of bad actors out there, and there's a range of issues related to socially responsible investing, but when you just talk about Israel and it becomes the sole focus of these movements on campus and elsewhere, it raises the question in my mind as to whether the issue is morality or Israel? And that is, I think, important. And for people who want to use this in a way that is going to reassure Israel, reassure the Jewish community in the States, I think you need to lead with some reassurances about its right to exist and right to self-defense and right to have security.

RV: I certainly have no problem affirming the right of Israel to exist. I don't think during the anti-apartheid struggle anyone was saying that because we were against apartheid we were against the right of South Africa to exist. States exist.

Lynn actually did say that there is suffering on both sides, and that is absolutely true. And I—as someone who has an Israeli husband and children, who lived in Israel for three years—I don't think anyone can accuse me personally or anyone from JVP of not having the interests of the people of Israel at heart. And I think Maya is a fantastic example of someone from within Israel who is saying the same thing, that we're all fighting together for a better future for all of the people, both in Israel and in Palestine.

But I think one thing that is very problematic about the accusation that it has something to do with the legitimacy of the state is that it sort of turns the argument on its head. People have been condemning Palestinian violent resistance against civilians, rightfully, for years. Yet here's this nonviolent tactic that's a way for Israelis and Palestinians and people of good faith around the world to make an impact on what these policies are doing to people every day in real time, and yet it's those tactics that are being attacked as delegitimizing the state just as vociferously as, if not more than, the violent tactics were. So then what tactic is left to use? I think it's extremely important as citizens of the world, as Jews, and as Americans—as Jews we're implicated in the Israeli state; as Americans we're implicated because of our tax dollars—that we have a way to express, and express in the political full-citizenship sense, our displeasure with Israel's actions.

Additionally, I don't think it's fair to talk about this as a “conflict.” Israel is the occupying power. Israel is the one that is illegally, by international standards, occupying Palestinian land, and Israel is the one that is violating human rights, unfortunately, every single day. So I don't think it's quite fair to say that it always needs to be about two sides, because sometimes one side does need to be called out more than the other. I think Israel, especially because it is considered to be a democracy, it is held to that standard. There are certainly worse human rights abusers in the world. However, Israel as a democratic state, as a Western state, as it declares itself, should be held accountable to international standards. I personally—with my personal attachments to Israel—I hold Israel to that standard, just as I hold the United States to that standard.

ML: Jeremy, do you think it would matter to J Street if resolutions supporting BDS were framed in such a way as to name other countries that it should also be used against, for example, China in relationship to Tibet, Russia in relationship to Chechnya, and Darfur and a number of other human rights-violating states (and Israel was mentioned there as one of those), and then resolutions called for divestment, sanctions, and boycott against all of them and not simply against Israel? Do you think that would change—internally, in J Street and among the people who are the part of the peace movement who do want movement to end the suffering on both sides but who are concerned about Israel being singled out—do you think that would make the difference?

JBA: Well, I think that there would be support within J Street for an effort to frame the discussion around socially responsible investing. There's a whole range (*continued on page 74*)

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IT'S SO QUEER TO GIVE MONEY AWAY

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terrified by the idea of a child or grandchild who is refusing their birthright wealth out of a recognition that the inheritance system sustains wealth disparity and that all wealth is stolen. People often need significant community support to take those steps, just as we do when we come out as queer or trans.

These and other conversations are vitally important—but not because we naively believe they are all that is required to end wealth and poverty. The systemic conditions that produce capitalism and its violence are not going to be resolved just by my monthly donations or by someone else giving away a trust fund. However, these practices are also not separate from systemic change. They are about building resources for our resistance movements, and they are about doing the difficult emotional work of examining internalized capitalism. We know that the personal is political, both because material realities are composed of our collective practices, and because broad-based transformation often emerges from experiments taken up at the local level.

In 2008, Tyrone Boucher and I started a blog called Enough (enoughenough.org) that aims to create a space for cross-class dialogue about the personal politics of wealth redistribution. Contributors have shared their experiences and experiments, ranging from choosing to sell a house at below-market value to prevent gentrification, to throwing dinner parties aimed at building this conversation within a social scene, to confronting family about plans to give away inherited wealth. Many contributors have been inspired by the work of Resource Generation, an organization that works with young people with wealth on these issues, and its book, *Classified*, which is an excellent resource. To see examples of the emerging queer and trans racial and economic justice work, check out the Audre Lorde Project (alp.org), FIERCE! (fierceny.org), the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (srlp.org), and Queers for Economic Justice (q4ej.org). ■

BDS

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of corporate bad actors. So if *Tikkun's* question to J Street is, “Would J Street support efforts to frame socially responsible investing guidelines for universities and other pension funds and other things that would sweep up in it military contractors that supply countries including Israel?” then my answer is that we might consider that, if it is not framed in a resolution that seems to suggest that in the Israel/Palestine struggle one side's right and one side's wrong. Then it's a different context and that's all I was saying.

LG: I think the Presbyterians were trying to do that, actually.

JBA: There are two things on the table. One is that issue of whether this is framed as just about Israel or about socially responsible investing. And the other is whether or not the strategy itself is going to be effective.

Effectiveness is something that has come up in this conversation and just needs to be looked at by activists who want to see an end to the Occupation, who want freedom and justice for the Palestinians. It is my view, and J Street's view, that this is just not going to be effective. I don't think this approach will help us reach and find a sympathetic ear with enough

Israelis and with enough Jewish Americans to actually change direction.

I think the more that this BDS voice gets louder and louder, then, as Maya said, people in Israel are going to get more and more defensive about it. I just don't think that this is creating an atmosphere that's conducive to opening up to compromise and sacrifice for peace. I hope we all accept Israel's right to exist, I *hope* we accept its right to self-defense, I hope we understand that the history of this conflict is very complex and it's not just one side doing bad things and one innocent victim. In this conflict everybody is a victim and everybody has done bad things, and we can only focus on going forward and how we are going to be effective. And I don't think that's by a movement that really just is one-sided.

ML: Would you say, Jeremy, that there is another tactic you would recommend to people who have been deeply concerned about these issues and who would on the one hand want to support J Street and its work inside the Beltway, but would also want to be doing work in the country as a whole outside J Street and on campuses and in communities where the level of upset about what Israel is doing is growing? Would you recommend some other strategy that those people should be engaged in?



Some peace activists believe that we will have less credibility in challenging the Israel lobby in Congress, above, if the movement focuses on BDS rather than building more effective political coalitions.

JBA: Well, I think what has been missing in American politics and in the American discussion about all this is a strong voice that is really recognizing that this conflict and the resolution of the conflict are a serious American interest, that the resolution is in the best interests of the Israeli people and in the best interests of the Palestinian people, and we need to create a positive movement that shows as much strength as possible, that says we want this conflict to end and we want the U.S. to weigh in and we want a just and viable resolution to this conflict. And I think that kind of a positive message—we are beginning to refer to this as building a community of yes against the chorus of no—that’s the kind of messaging that I think will help Israelis to say yes, it is time to end this conflict, it is time for us to move on with our lives, it is time for the Palestinians to have a state. That’s the positive movement and messaging we need to be creating.

ML: OK, great—who was it who wanted to speak? Maya, was that you?

MW: As an Israeli, I can tell you that many Israelis don’t really believe that they are going to have much impact in changing our government, and I think many Americans also feel similarly, because it seems sort of far from you, and from an individual and their everyday life. And something like consuming differently or divesting from something that your community is invested in or just not buying certain products is, in a sense, a very personal action you can take in your everyday life that can be effective. And also, specifically I would argue as Jews, don’t you think, Jeremy, that maybe it is exactly our place to create a call for BDS that is, you could say positive, that doesn’t use words like boycott but rather economic activism or responsible consumerism or responsible investment, and says as Jews, “Not in our name. This is not what we want.”

JBA: The question is a political question. This requires political action and political leadership. The decisions to be made here are not going to be made by United Technologies and they’re not going to be made by the Berkeley Board of Governors. The decisions are going to be made by the prime minister of Israel and the president of the United States and the

head of the PLO. Those are the actors that have it within their power to make these decisions, so the movement to be built is a political movement. The movement is to say we must end this conflict and we want political leadership that will do that, and I think that’s a positive outlet and that’s what we’re trying to build, to say a majority of Jewish Americans want the president of the United States to act firmly and assertively and proactively now to help end this conflict, and that’s where the majority of our community is actually at.

And to build a movement that has a positive message. I think it’s important to have that movement led by people who can say, “I’m happy to say I’m a Zionist. I believe in the concept of a Jewish home. The only way that Zionism succeeds is if you have a Palestinian state. The only way that Zionism will continue to be a place, a movement, an ideology that has any validity at all is if there is a two-state solution with recognized borders.”

MW: In theory it sounds really nice to build a positive movement, but let’s face it: the majority of Israelis, though, I would argue, do suffer greatly. We, as Israelis, suffer from this Occupation; being a soldier is terrible, and everything you go through in the army. But the average Israeli doesn’t feel right now like our situation is that bad.

I can and do live in Jerusalem comfortably. I have no fear of terror attacks, I have no fear of my life whatsoever, and I’m comfortable. The Occupation is really comfortable for so many Israelis, and so many people are profiting from it, and the Israeli society is becoming more fascist and more racist. It’s really concerning me. There was just a poll showing that a third of Israeli teenagers thought that the Israeli Arabs, as in Palestinians who *are* Israeli citizens, shouldn’t even vote. I mean, it’s not looking good in our society and I’m honestly wondering, what’s in it for the average Israeli to want to change anything? This Occupation, it’s pretty comfortable for us right now. We haven’t had a terror attack in ages.

ML: One of the arguments that has been made against BDS is that it increases the level of paranoia in Israel, and that that paranoia is one of the major reasons

why Israelis are not moving towards some kind of peace settlement. But Maya’s counterargument is that in actual fact, when the United States tries to put pressure on Israel to change its policies the same paranoia emerges—from a country that has had a long history with Israel and still continues its support. The moment the U.S. tries to pressure Israel, the same level of paranoia emerges as would emerge from a BDS strategy. So that the problem of paranoia will be there no matter which way one goes in trying to change Israeli policy, be it BDS or be it the J Street/*Tikkun* strategy of building enough popular support in the U.S. for our government to play a more powerful role in pushing Israel toward peace, that is, to act in its own best interest and the best interest of the U.S. and the best interest of global peace and security.

JBA: Don’t forget the truism that even paranoids do have enemies. I think there is a real need for addressing security as part of this end-of-conflict. And one of the ways in which it—the concept that we have to end this in a two-state solution—is best sold to the Israeli public is with a firm international commitment to Israel’s security. And it is only when Israel feels that there will not be 40,000 missiles in the West Bank aimed at Ben-Gurion Airport and ready to go at a moment’s notice will they feel that they have the security to actually give up the West Bank. I think the U.S., the Europeans, the UN—they all have a very large role to play in providing that sense of security.

So again I go back to what has been somewhat dismissed in this conversation as naïveté, but I believe is the only realistic option, which is that we’ve got to do this through love and not anger. And I think the way in which you create an environment for the Israeli public and the American Jewish community and then ultimately for American politics to have this happen is when there isn’t any question at all about America’s commitment to Israel’s security, to providing those security guarantees so that if it does make the compromises and gives up the land and makes the deal, that it knows that it’s going to have American guarantees of security. And that’s what the president and I

think the Congress and others have to do in order to answer the paranoia.

RV: I want to go back to what it was like to be living in Tel Aviv during the Gaza War, when you could walk the streets and you would never ever know that a war was happening. People were in their cafes: “Hi, how’s it going?” “Everything’s great.”

Everything was “just fine” at the same time that people were being killed, the phosphorus bombs were dropping—all the terrible things that Israel did during that offensive. One of the things that I took from that experience is that Israelis are already at a place where they feel justified in using a level of military force that should be absolutely unacceptable to all of us internationally who care about such things. We have to look at some other ways, as Maya said, of making them feel that this is not OK. So far, the American government in its quest for peace has not had the willingness to put any consequences on Israel, and Israel therefore keeps on doing what it’s doing: building settlements, tightening its grip on the Occupation, continuing the siege of Gaza, treating its own Palestinian citizens like a fifth column.

I agree with Jeremy that we need to be strategic and that there is ultimately going to be a political solution, absolutely. But I think there’s room for all different kinds of strategies to get us to that point, where people in the U.S. and in Israel will embrace a fair political solution. We need to do congressional pressure, and I think we need to do different forms of BDS.

Part of the reason that BDS will be effective is because the discussions it generates provide a good public education opportunity, so that people can start to understand the collusion between large corporations and the Israeli government and the role of the American government. There have been some small victories so far in the BDS movement in terms of consequences being put on companies that are supporting the Occupation, and it’s true that we won’t know whether it’ll be a success until it happens, but that certainly doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try them.

JBA: I share the view of somebody at

the very beginning who said that it’s so important that we have this discussion in a civil way. I think that the Jewish community as a whole is making a huge mistake by creating any sort of content-based guidelines for either events or funding that keep some people out of the discussion—sometimes it’s J Street, sometimes it’s you guys—but it is inappropriate for a community to keep this discussion quiet. It’s a very important function *Tikkun* is providing in giving this a place to happen and some publicity, and I hope that it is part of a broader discussion in the community as a whole about how to end the Occupation, how to achieve peace and security for Israel and for the Palestinians, and how to achieve a sense of justice and an end to this conflict. Because this is a terrible stain on the Jewish people. It’s a terrible stain on our history. And we must bring it to an end for the sake of Israel and for the American Jewish community.

LG: Insha’Allah.

ML: I want to say that people in the *Tikkun* community were at some of the debates that took place around the BDS resolution in Berkeley. And they reported hearing or being personally emotionally assaulted by others there supporting the divestment resolution, who said to them literally these words: “Dirty Jew” and “You Jews have blood on your hands.” Things that made them feel that the BDS movement was aligning with those in the Palestinian world or in other worlds that were willing to make generalized statements against Jews, not just criticism of Israeli policies. So I’m wondering if there’s any kind of guideline that any of you have for what is acceptable or what is not acceptable in the way of allies in this struggle, and how do you separate yourself from those who move on a slippery slope in the direction of anti-Semitism?

RV: I personally was not at the Berkeley hearings, but my colleagues Cecilie Surasky and Sydney Levy were at both hearings the entire night, the entire twelve-hour nights of both hearings, and both of them said quite clearly that they never heard a single anti-Semitic word during the entire course of the hearing. Secondly, we in JVP have guidelines that

are in our mission statement—we are against anti-Semitism, against anti-Arab bigotry and anti-Muslim bigotry, and we call it out any time we hear it; it’s not acceptable. Any of those forms of bigotry are absolutely unacceptable and we do not work with people who express anything like that. And in the particular case of Berkeley, nothing like that was heard whatsoever. The behavior of the folks from Students for Justice in Palestine was absolutely impeccable in that regard.

LG: I have had direct experiences when I’m talking, in a variety of settings, where the conversation has slipped into what I would call anti-Semitic language, such as the use of the words “Jewish Lobby,” which I consider to be an anti-Semitic term. And there is a way that “Zionism” is sometimes used as an anti-Semitic term. I find that sometimes these terms are used unconsciously and sometimes they are meant to hurt.

And like Rebecca, I’m sure like all of us, we have to continually have the conversation to define our terms and what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. It is a rather messy situation. That is true. But we cannot turn away from the call to justice and responding to injustice because there are some bad actors in our midst. *Ad’raba*, on the contrary, Jewish involvement in a solidarity struggle helps to reduce a climate of anti-Semitism, because otherwise we would be entirely absent. It is in relationship with us that people’s hearts and minds are changed. I have been in countless, and I mean countless, situations in which I am the first Jewish person that a Palestinian has met that was not wearing an Israeli Army uniform, and that has made a difference.

RV: In addition to the importance of those kinds of conversations and us being very vigilant around anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry, we also need to have a discussion about Jewish privilege, because one of the dynamics at the Berkeley hearing was that a portion of the Jewish community in Berkeley was saying that they felt uncomfortable because of this divestment resolution, and as Maya said there is an element of discomfort when you hear things that

are difficult to hear. But that level of discomfort was used as an argument for Berkeley not to divest from American military suppliers that were actually implementing the Occupation and so that Palestinian students, for example, certainly also felt very uncomfortable at the fact that their university was supporting the occupation of their own lands, but that was devalued compared with the Jewish experience of feeling discomfort. I think it's very important that at the same time that we are vigilant about anti-Semitism, we also have a discussion about Jewish privilege in these sorts of forums.

ML: As you probably know, with my house having been defaced by right-wing Zionists I am very uncomfortable with those in the Jewish world who label anybody who's critical of Israel as an anti-Semite, and in response to those attacks I have insisted that this should be a moment in which the Jewish community comes out against violent language including inciting language, incitement-to-violence language, like labeling people who support BDS as automatically anti-Semitic, and I have made the point to the Jewish community that if we are to declare anti-Semitic those who engage in nonviolent strategies, even strategies we disagree with, about trying to change Israel, then the whole term anti-Semitism loses its meaning.

LG: Thank you for that. ■

OYL

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freedom schools, mass mobilizations, vital vigils).

It took concerted action by Congress, as well as many local governmental and private bodies, to end racial segregation and to make sure that African American communities were included in the American political process. Just so, it will take concerted congressional action—as well as many actions by local and state governments and by “private” bodies such as businesses, religious congregations, labor unions, and PTAs—to go beyond the dangers that the over-burning of fossil fuels now pose to our country and our planet.

Let us turn to the Jewish fast day of Tisha B'Av (July 19-20 this year). It commemorates the destruction of two Holy Temples in Jerusalem—one by the Babylonian Empire in 586 BCE and one by the Roman Empire in 70 CE. In the rabbinic tradition, that disastrous day was also the day when *Mashiach* (Messiah) was born—born but hidden away because humanity was not yet ready to usher in the Messianic Days of peace, justice, healing.

So Tisha B'Av is a day of both grief and hope.

I propose celebrating it in a new way. For many of us in this generation, the Holy Temple is not just in Jerusalem but is the whole round planet. Earth. In danger of destruction, and begging us both to grieve and to give birth to a planetary community that actually treats the whole web of life with respect.

So we could draw on the spiritual depths of Tisha B'Av in a politically activist way: “praying with our arms and legs.”

We could address our grief as we watch disasters like the Gulf oil blowout, the droughts that are destroying large parts of Africa, the melting snows and glaciers. And we could hold high the vision of a planetary community (Birthing of Mashiach) that is also part of the tradition of Tisha B'Av.

In order to draw on large numbers of people who might not be able to take part on a regular work day, public events to do this might be held on Sunday, July 18, in Washington, D.C., and perhaps in many communities throughout the country (and beyond).

In regard to Washington: imagine a gathering of anywhere between fifty and one thousand Jews (and others if they feel so moved) at either or both the Capitol and White House, reading all or part of *Eicha* (the Book of Lamentations), interspersed with *Kinot* (laments) for the earth. (Tamara Cohen, who is the Barbara Bick Memorial Fellow of the Shalom Center, is working on a liturgy for Tisha B'Av that will focus on the endangered earth as Holy Temple.)

There should also be time for hope—for singing songs, for kids as well as grownups to paint pictures of the decent future, and for other joyful expressions of

Mashiach-time.

Depending on what is happening at that time earth wise on the Gulf Coast, in the Senate, etc., the Tisha B'Av gatherings could put forth specific demands/proposals for healing the earth. Demands like:

- Prohibiting any further oil-well drilling off the coasts of the United States.
- Insisting that Congress plan step-by-step for the shift from coal to wind and solar power for generating electricity in America, in a ten-year time frame.
- Setting the Chanukah standard for using oil by 2020—one day's oil meeting eight days' needs, as the story of Chanukah says happened when the Maccabees rededicated the Temple.

The Shalom Center will provide the new earth-centered Tisha B'Av liturgy to those who are ready to do this in their own locales, perhaps at politically sensitive places like EPA offices or BP installations, or perhaps in their own congregations.

And if there is a “critical mass” of Washingtonians who will join in doing this, the Shalom Center will be glad to send out information on this, inviting people from say, New York City to Virginia, to come to D.C.

Some participants in D.C. (or elsewhere) might feel moved to do nonviolent civil disobedience, others not. Some might observe the full twenty-four-hour Tisha B'Av fast from food and water, others not. Some might extend the no-food part of the fast beyond Tisha B'Av. Some might want to visit specific congressional representatives.

I suggest this as a model for similar actions that might be undertaken by varied American communities—actions like proclaiming our independence from fossil-fuel domination and damage on Independence Day, July 4. Like focusing the fast of Ramadan on learning self-restraint in our urge to gobble up the earth's abundance. Like renewing and transforming the meaning of Labor Day.

Please write me at: awaskow@shalomctr.org to let me know what you think of this possibility, what you would want to add to it, how you would want to change it, and what you yourself would bring to make it real. ■