



## Why I Support the BDS Movement

by

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on

[Dissident Voice](#)



# 729 = MADE IN ISRAEL

There has been a good amount of media attention surrounding Brooklyn College's Political Science Department and a student-run group called Students for Justice in Palestine hosting a forum on the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, and Sanction Movement (BDS) featuring Omar Barghouti and Judith Butler. Immediately, there were critical cries coming from the Anti-Defamation League, New York politicians, and of course the ubiquitous Alan Dershowitz. As I have read about the controversy and subsequently the event, I am reminded of how hard it is to be critical of Israel in the United States. And that is exacerbated when you are Jewish. Recently, I published an article titled, "Soccer and Societal Bigotry: Israeli Style," in *Left Hook: A Critical Review of Sports and Society*. I thought that the article was rather mild as it criticized the overt racism of supporters of the team Beitar Jerusalem and made connections to Israel's oppression of Palestine.

*Racism in Israeli soccer corresponds directly to the bigotry that is prevalent in Israeli society. In Israel, however, the racism is magnified because of the discrimination and oppression of Palestinians, a practice that some people around the World, including the prestigious Bertrand Russell Tribunal, refer to as apartheid.*



Okay, so using the "A" word invites condemnation. I know that. And while I was well aware of the hatred that is spewed toward those who criticize Israel, I wasn't ready for the venom that followed the article from some of the people with whom I grew up in a small, Jewish enclave of a larger suburb on the east side of Cleveland, Ohio. Comments by a close childhood friend represent the milder attitude.

*Not sure why you pick Israel to pick on when there are so many countries doing so many things worse and at the same time not providing most of their citizens with the freedoms Israel provides its minorities. Israel has more than its share of critics for such a small nation just trying to survive under the constant threat of extinction.*

As a Jew you just don't criticize Israel.

It was another person who immigrated to Israel shortly after high school that provided me with a personal reminder of why BDS is so important. Israeli oppression is getting more rather than less harsh – in both dispositions and actions. My old classmate offered numerous responses to my article and what he viewed as my impotent and harmful leftist views.

### **On writing about Israeli racism:**

*By singling out Israel (out of every nation on earth), I believe you have a broader agenda i.e., to demonize the Jewish State. It is a sickness no less than the "bigotry" about which you purport to write.*

While he made a point of telling me that he wasn't calling me a self-hating Jew, he did say:

*Your fake attachment to Israeli Jews is evident by your zealous allegiance to a larger group of fake people and others (Jew-haters and Israel bashers), who are enemies of Israel and the Jewish people, enemies who want us dead. Who loudly and daily call for our destruction. You are proud of this connection to these people and stand by them. You should be ashamed of yourself.*

### **My classmate took on violence and Palestinians:**

*If people come to apply the harshest of violence on you — to take your life — you have the perfect right and obligation to stop them. This we do — no apologies. Sorry we have to because we value life. But thank God we can defend ourselves. Defend ourselves against real criminals, killers. This is the real world here not some ivory tower parlor chat. Ever see bus bomb victims — big-time burns — women, children — civilians? I have. Maybe you don't know it but we live surrounded by killers — beasts. What, do you think these people stage peaceful sit-ins like the sixties? It is violence plain and simple.*

### **My classmate on The Wall and again his view of Palestinian people:**

*Wall? What wall? Do you mean the barrier that stopped Palestinian Arab suicide bombers for coming into my town and blowing people to bits? Yes my town. Don't worry that wall will come down when Palestinian Arab terrorism ceases. You can't occupy land that already belongs to you. It is disputed land. Resolution 194 is a code for the overwhelming of Israel with millions of Arabs thereby ending the Jewish majority that exists today. Right, like that'll happen.*

At one point I commented that he sounds a lot like the apologists of apartheid in South Africa:

*Heavens! "people" "accuse" me or Israelis of apartheid. Big deal. Does it make it so just because "people" think so. "People" have been "accusing" Israel (the Jews) of many things.: of killing non-Jewish children for their blood to use in the making of matza, of being behind 9/11 Twin Towers terrorist outrage (don't tell me you believe that there is even the slightest grain of truth to that load of crap), killing Jesus, owning all the banks, controlling the media,*



*starting all the wars and on and on and on. Is it all true because people, even many people believe it? No and hell no. People will believe whatever they want to, I don't care, we aren't here to win any popularity contest.*

So how does one even begin to respond on any level? If we turn back to the BDS controversy at Brooklyn College, however, we see that the academics and politicians who view BDS as hateful and anti-Semitic, sound much like my former classmate.

First, it might be appropriate to review some of the brief history of the controversy surrounding the BDS forum at Brooklyn College. As noted above, when the event was announced there was an immediate, intense, negative reaction. Jewish organizations in the United States are very clear in their criticism of BDS and the Anti-Defamation League has spoken out against events at various universities including Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania where the ADF has equated BDS with strident anti-Semitism. The organization has objected directly to university officials where students have voted for divestment and their critiques of former President Carter and Bishop Tutu have been very loud. When Brooklyn College announced the forum, ADF took out a full-page advertisement in the [em]New York Times[/em] where they equated the right of Palestinians to return to their land with anti-Semitism.

To be fair to the critics of the BDS forum, their public issue was that the institution, Brooklyn College, should not be sponsoring a political point of view. It is interesting, though, because Harvard law professor, Alan Dershowitz, one of the most vocal critics, did not complain about the very same Political Science department sponsoring a lecture that he presented at Brooklyn College. As one professor recalled: "The department has sponsored hundreds of events, including Alan Dershowitz's 2008 Konefsky Lecture where he defended torture, where there has been no one presenting the other side."

The call for fairness, though, appears spurious when one considers the language of the critics. Before the forum took place, Dershowitz referred to the event as a "propaganda hate orgy." He has labeled BDS academic boycotts as "immoral, illegal and despicable" while at the same time distorting truth saying that the organization blacklists and boycotts Jewish Israeli professors. While it is beyond the scope of this essay – academic institutions, not individual professors, are boycotted. The three tenets of BDS are:

- \* Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall.
- \* Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality.
- \* Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194.

These are the topics that both Omar Barghouti and Judith Butler outlined in their presentations as the former said: "It is time for Palestinians' freedom, justice and equality."

But between the time that the forum was first advertised and the actual staging of the event, it was local politicians who spewed the most venom. Their words joined those of my school classmate. In an article by Chemi Shaley in [em]Haaretz[/em], he wrote about the New York officials who had argued that the forum was a call for the end of Israel.

*After 19 "progressive" politicians – including four members of the US Congress – wrote a letter to the College against the sponsorship, things took a turn for the worse when ten New York City Council members threatened to cut funding to the College – a widely respected academic institution sometimes referred to as "the poor man's Harvard" – if it did not reverse its sponsorship. "We believe in the principle of academic freedom. However we also believe in the principle of not supporting schools whose programs we, and our constituents, find to be odious and wrong" the council members' letter said.*

Some of these public voices became harsh as they misinterpreted history. Council member Alan



Maisel said: "We're talking about the potential for a second Holocaust here." The most vocal critic was democratic New York State Assemblyman Dov Hikund. At a public meeting preceding the forum he was ultra-clear on his views of BDS and Palestinians. He argued that the goal of BDS was to end Israel's existence through a "philosophical war demonizing Jews and denying the rights of Jews to self-determination and equality." Hikund labeled BDS as "the modern incarnation of anti-Semitism - same stink, different excuse." Finally, his final assertions play to America's definition of terrorism.

*The BDS movement's goal is to de-legitimize Israel's existence. Like its philosophical brothers in Hamas, BDS aims to eliminate the State of Israel from the map. Only its tactics differ from its terrorist cousins: While Hamas blows up buses of innocent men, women and children, BDS works to isolate Israelis, to cut them off from business. Yes, BDS is the benevolent face of anti-Semitism. They don't suggest killing Israeli citizens with bombs; they prefer starvation via isolation. They think Hamas and Hezbollah are nice organizations, and they probably feel the same way about Al Qaeda!*

Slogans, code words, whatever you want to call them: Interesting, though, is that Hikund accuses BDS of doing what the rest of the world sees as Israel's actions in oppressing the Palestinian people - eliminate, isolate, cut off from business, killing innocent men, women, and children. This is the same New York State Assemblyman who recently celebrated at a Purim party wearing black face makeup, an Afro wig, and a basketball jersey. When asked about it on CBS radio news, Hikund said that he did not mean to offend anyone and that it "never crossed his mind that it might be offensive."

But the words and the actions of Hikund, Dershowitz, and the others who tried to prohibit the BDS forum and punish Brooklyn College are more than offensive as they falsify history and ignore the present in terms of Israeli oppression of Palestine. Chemi Shalev, previously cited above, analyzes their actions.

*They make mountains out of molehills, carve Nazis out of Palestinians, evoke pogroms and massacres from each and every violent incident. They don't acknowledge the occupation, see nothing wrong with settlements or "Price Tag" violence, turn a blind eye to 46 years of Palestinian disenfranchisement, regardless of whose fault it is. They recognize only one truth, their own, and view all the rest as heresy and abomination. By their narrow definitions, no less than 50% of Israelis who voted in the last elections for parties that support a two-state solution should be condemned - possibly by the U.S. Senate itself - as Israel-hating, Arab-loving defeatists.*

The show did go on, however, with mild protests and thoughtful, political lectures from both Omar Barghouti and Judith Butler. Barghouti was one of the 2005 founders of the BDS Movement and he also was a cofounder of the Palestinian Campaign for Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel. Corresponding to the subtitle of this article, he explained to the audience that the voracious attempts to ban the BDS Forum were in fact a systematic program to "undermine an open dialogue about Israel's conduct and Palestinian resistance undertaken in order to demoralize those who support and take part in it."

Barghouti spoke about post-1948 Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people and cited Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, to argue that the oppression had dehumanized both Israelis and Palestinians. He concluded by outlining BDS successes since 2005 and compared the Movement to the worldwide Anti-Apartheid Movement that was one of the elements that led to the first democratic South African election in 2004. Appropriately, Barghouti's latest book, *Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions: The Global Struggle for Palestinian Rights*, was reviewed by one of the World's champions of peace, South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

*I have been to Palestine where I've witnessed the racially segregated housing and the humiliation of Palestinians at military roadblocks. I can't help but remember the conditions we experienced in South Africa under apartheid. We could not have achieved our freedom without the help of people around the world using the nonviolent means of boycotts and divestment to compel governments and institutions to withdraw their support for the apartheid regime. Omar Barghouti's lucid and morally compelling book is perfectly*



*timed to make a major contribution to this urgently needed global campaign for justice, freedom and peace.*

Omar Barghouti concluded his talk by explaining how important Israeli partners are to the cooperation and resistance of the BDS movement – he referred to it as "co-resistance."

Judith Butler's talk was two speeches in one – freedom of speech and the importance of the BDS Movement. First, the essence of the Movement according to Butler:

*The Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement is, in fact, a non-violent movement; it seeks to use established legal means to achieve its goals; and it is, interestingly enough, the largest Palestinian civic movement at this time. That means that the largest Palestinian civic movement is a non-violent one that justifies its actions through recourse to international law. Further, I want to underscore that this is also a movement whose stated core principles include the opposition to every form of racism, including both state-sponsored racism and anti-Semitism.*

Through a further discussion on BDS and anti-Semitism, Butler connects to the "The Difficulties of Jews Criticizing Israel" portion of this essay.

*If the Jew who struggles for justice for Palestine is considered to be anti-Semitic, if any number of internationals who have joined this struggle from various parts of the world are also considered anti-Semitic and if Palestinians seeking rights of political self-determination are so accused as well, then it would appear that no oppositional move that can take place without risking the accusation of anti-Semitism. That accusation becomes a way of discrediting a bid for self-determination, at which point we have to ask what political purpose the radical misuse of that accusation has assumed in the stifling of a movement for political self-determination.*

While some of my classmates from years ago as well as too high a percentage of American Jews still define Palestinians as terrorists, the points argued by Omar Barghouti and Judith Butler make the mission clear. Not only must we all speak out for Palestine, but we also must support the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanction Movement. North Americans like Angela Davis and Naomi Klein have brilliantly argued supportively for BDS, but it is the voices of Palestinian and Israeli allies that emphasize the importance of supporters throughout the world campaigning for BDS. For those who have doubts about ideology or daily events on the ground in Palestine, please view the two films *Five Broken Cameras* and *The Gatekeepers* that were nominated this year for Best Documentary Picture at the Academy Awards. Palestinians and Israelis working on the ground against Israeli oppression include activists like Mustafa Barghouti, Neve Gordon, Ilan Pappé, and Michael Warschawski. Although their views are not unilateral, they all do believe that Israel is the oppressor and that there needs to be support and action through BDS.

## **Oppression**

Mustafa Barghouti:

*Let us be clear: Israel has been working around the clock to destroy the option of an independent Palestinian state and, by extension, the two-state solution. But that does not leave the Palestinian people without an alternative, as some Zionist leaders undoubtedly hope. The single democratic state (not the single binational state), in which all citizens are equal in rights and duties regardless of their religious affiliations and origins, is an alternative to the attempt to force the Palestinians to accept slavery under occupation.*

Ilan Pappé:

*Today, Israel is a formidable settler-colonialist state, unwilling to transform or compromise, and eager to crush by whatever means necessary any resistance to its control and rule in historical Palestine. Beginning with the ethnic cleansing of 80 percent of Palestine in 1948,*





*and Israel's occupation of the remaining 20 percent of the land in 1967, Palestinians in Israel are now enclaved in mega-prisons, bantustans, and besieged cantons, and singled out through discriminatory policies... The Israeli settler state continues to further colonize and uproot the indigenous people of Palestine.*

## **Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions**

Neve Gordon:

*The only way to counter the apartheid trend in Israel is through massive international pressure. The words and condemnations from the Obama administration and the European Union have yielded few results... I have decided to support the BDS movement... The objective is to ensure that Israel respects its obligations under international law, and that Palestinians are granted the right to self-determination... Nothing else has worked. Putting massive international pressure on Israel is the only way to guarantee that the next generation of Israelis and Palestinians – my two boys included – does not grow up in an apartheid regime.*

Michael Warschawski:

*BDS is addressed to the Israeli public. At this historical juncture it is the only way to provoke a change in Israel's attitude toward occupation and colonization. If one compares it to the anti-apartheid BDS campaign that took twenty years to start bearing fruit, one cannot but be surprised how efficient the anti-Israeli occupation campaign has already been – even in Israel, we can already witness its first effects.*

Palestinians, Israelis, and people throughout the world have witnessed Israel's exacerbating occupation of Palestine. While no one condones suicide bombers, Israel's oppression of the Palestinian people is not a debatable issue. The critics of the Brooklyn Forum were not truthful but rather ideological – there are not two sides to the issue and that means that we must speak out and act as allies of the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement.