

Why I Support BDS

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by Rabbi Margaret Holub

I try to think about why I hold the opinions I do. In thinking about Israel and Palestine, like many of us my thinking is formed to a great degree by time I have spent in both places. I have been especially moved by visits I have made to the West Bank in 1995, 2002 and 2007. In particular I spent some time in Hebron in 2007, and that experience shaped my thinking and feeling quite deeply. I also was involved for some years in advocating for a poor family in Beit Ummar whose house has been slated for demolition because it fronts on the settlers-only bypass road, and this caused me to keep up in some detail with the practice of home demolition over those years.

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I think back to my first visit to the home of a Palestinian peace activist in Ramallah. As we made our plans to visit, he asked me if my husband wore a kippah — he said that they had been under curfew for 31 days recently, and his young children were consequently terrified of men in kippot. I think of the families I met in Hebron who have to climb in and out of windows to their own houses, because Palestinians are not allowed to walk on the street where their homes front. I think of an old man on a donkey with his grandson, also in Hebron, forced to dismount and empty his saddlebags at a checkpoint. I think of sitting in a meeting with the mayor of Beit Ummar, a Hamas member, and him joking mordantly that his 30 recent days in jail, his most recent of four post-election imprisonments, were a vacation — then saying that in fact those 30 days “injure me from inside.” I think of the Sabarneh family, my “partner family” in Beit Ummar, whose very poor house has been slated for demolition for over a decade, learning that a portion of their field would also soon be seized for settlement expansion.

I know that there are policy reasons on the part of the IDF for many individual demolition orders, checkpoints, passbook requirements, segregated roadways, destruction of trees, confiscation of Palestinian farmland, detentions without charge, establishment of “sterile areas” and other particulars of the occupation which may seem defensible when judged in isolation. I understand that high unemployment and deprivation and periodic violence may be seen as collateral damage. But I find the larger project of occupation, viewed as a whole, to be shameful. And I feel very strongly that it needs to end.

Are the occupation of the West Bank and the constriction of Gaza worse than the occupation of Tibet or the incursions of Sudan into South Sudan or other places of oppression of one people by another? I don't know. But as a Jew, and particularly as a leader of Jews, I feel like I have “skin in the game” with regard to what Jews do in the

world which is different than my relationship with other places of inequality and oppression. For me, when Torah is quoted in support of these policies and Jewish politicians and bureaucrats write them and Jewish soldiers impose them, then *kol yisrael arevim zeh im zeh* (“all Jews are responsible for one another”) and as a Jew I feel responsible to voice my opposition. I am surprised when I hear people say that we who don’t live in Israel shouldn’t judge what Israel does. If that is the case, then we shouldn’t support Israel either.

I also feel some *hirhur bi’tshuvah* (“inclination to repentance”) as an American about the occupation, knowing that it is supported in such great measure not only by US foreign aid but also American weapons, training and political cooperation. As Americans we are complicit in a whole panoply of oppressions. But US commitment to Israel’s present policy is disturbingly large, even relative to its other malign commitments.

A happier source of my thinking is time I have spent in South Africa since the change happened there in 1992. I have visited three times, including two extended sabbaticals there. I went specifically to experience the aftermath of apartheid and to try to find some hope with regard to Israel and Palestine. And I came away from my time there feeling hopeful indeed. South Africa today is a difficult place in many ways, but it has made a largely successful transition to a multiracial democracy. In particular, the slaughter of whites, which was so greatly feared in the waning days of apartheid (and maybe for its whole duration) never happened. It is worthwhile to think about why that specter didn’t materialize. South Africa has its own story and its own politics; but I think there is much we can learn there, not even so much about apartheid and occupation as about transition and healing.

I am most grateful that a wide cross-section of Palestinian organizations came together and issued their call for divestment. This provides a way for me to do something besides passively holding supportive opinions. I am still in the process of parsing out in my own conscience which parts of the complex landscape of BDS I support. I have no hesitation at all about advocating for divestment from corporations whose products and facilities directly support the occupation. This is where Jewish Voice for Peace is putting its efforts. Thinking about South Africa in particular makes me inclined to support the boycott of Israeli products and divestment from Israeli corporations and sanctioning entertainers, sports figures and the like who choose to perform in Israel. I think it is important for Israeli to know that world opinion is increasingly united in opposition to the occupation. It’s time for it to end.

There is no joy for me in advocating against the actions of my own people. I want Jewish business and culture and productivity to thrive in our world. But not at cost of the lives and livelihoods and homes and farms of another people. I hope very much that BDS will be a potent and quickly-effective worldwide movement and that very soon we can all, as South Africa has, turn our attention to the many crises of a just and sustainable aftermath to a cruel chapter in our history.