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Israeli state

YES to BDS!

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The call for BDS – Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions – has finally reached Israeli public opinion. The decision of Norway to divest capitals from Israeli corporations involved in settlement buildings made the difference, and provided the first big success to that important campaign.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/mikado-2.jpg>]

Michel Warschawsky

Moreover, the group of Israelis supporting BDS, under the label “Boycott from Within” is gaining some momentum, thanks, among other, to a public appeal by Naomi Klein to Israeli activists when she came to Tel Aviv to present the Hebrew version of her “Shock Doctrine”.

The fact that there is an (even small) Israeli voice to support the international BDS campaign makes a lot of difference, and, among other, helps to disarm the infamous accusation of Anti-Semitism raised by the Israeli propagandist machine against everyone who dare to criticize the colonial policies of the Jewish State. Moreover, as I will argue towards the end of this article, the Israeli supporters of BDS are in fact expressing the true and long-term interests of the Israeli people. Reading recently two texts of Uri Avnery criticizing BDS convinced me that it was important to clarify how positive is that campaign and why should it be supported by as many Israelis as possible.

I sometimes disagree with Avnery’s opinions – though much less than in the past – but I have great respect for the man, the journalist, the activist and the analyst, and since the bankruptcy of Peace Now during the Oslo process, we have been closely active together. I may even say that we became friends. This is why I feel compelled to react to his criticism of the BDS campaign.

In order to present in the most accurate way Uri’s position, I will not use paraphrases, but quote what I think to be his main arguments.

(...) I HAVE no argument with people who hate Israel. That’s entirely their right. I just don’t think that we have any common ground for discussion.

I would only like to point out that hatred is a very bad advisor. Hatred leads nowhere, but to more hatred. That, by the way, is a positive lesson we can draw from the South African experience. There they overcame hatred to a remarkable extent, largely thanks to the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” headed by Archbishop Tutu, where people admitted their past offenses.

One thing is certain: hatred does not lead towards peace. Let me be quite explicit about this, because I sense that some people, in their righteous indignation over Israel’s occupation, have lost sight of this.

Peace is made between enemies, after war, in which awful things invariably happen. Peace can be made and maintained between peoples who are prepared to live with each other, respect each other, recognize the humanity of each other. They don’t have to love each other (...)

I ALSO have no argument with those who want to abolish the State of Israel. It is as much their right to aspire to that as it is my right to want to dismantle, let’s say, the USA or France, neither of which has an unblemished past.

Reading some of the messages sent to me and trying to analyze their contents, I get the feeling they are not so much about a boycott on Israel as about the very existence of Israel. Some of the writers obviously believe that the creation of the State of Israel was a terrible mistake to start with, and therefore should be reversed. Turn the wheel of history back some 62 years and start anew.

What really disturbs me about this is that almost nobody in the West comes out and says clearly: Israel must be abolished. Some of the proposals, like those for a "One State" solution, sound like euphemisms. If one believes that the State of Israel should be abolished and replaced by a State of Palestine or a State of Happiness – why not say so openly?

Of course, that does not mean peace. Peace between Israel and Palestine presupposes that Israel is there. Peace between the Israeli people and the Palestinian people presupposes that both peoples have a right to self-determination and agree to the peace. Does anyone really believe that racist monsters like us would agree to give up our state because of a boycott? (...)

THE REAL argument is among those who want to see peace between the two states, Israel and Palestine. The question is: how can it be achieved? This is an honest debate and is generally conducted in a civil manner (...)

The advocates of boycott believe that the main, indeed the only way to induce Israel to give up the occupied territories and agree to peace is to exert pressure from the outside.

I have no quarrel with the idea of outside pressure. The question is: pressure on whom? On the government, the settlers and their supporters? Or on the entire Israeli people?

(...) The struggle is on, it is a hard struggle against determined opposition, and we should do all we can to help Obama's peace policy to prevail. We must do this as Israelis, from inside Israel, and thereby show that this is not a struggle of the US against Israel, but a joint struggle against the Israeli government and the settlers.

It follows that any boycott must serve this purpose: to isolate the settlers and the individuals and institutions which openly support them, but not declare war on Israel and the Israeli people as such. In the 11 years since Gush Shalom declared a boycott of the products of the settlements, this process has been gaining momentum. We must laud the Norwegian decision, this week, to divest from the Israeli Elbit company because of their involvement with the "Separation Fence" that is being built on Palestinian land and whose main purpose is to annex occupied territories to Israel. This is a splendid example: a focused action against a specific target, based on a ruling of the International Court.

(...) I have been asked about the Palestinian reaction to the boycott idea. At present, Palestinians do not boycott even the settlements, indeed it is Palestinian workers who are building almost all the houses there, out of economic necessity. Their feelings can only be guessed. All self-respecting Palestinians would, of course, support any effective measure directed against the occupation. But it would not be honest to dangle before their eyes the false hope that a world-wide boycott would bring Israel to its knees. The truth is that only the close cooperation of Palestinian, Israeli and international peace forces could generate the necessary momentum to end the occupation and achieve peace.

This is especially important because our task in Israel today is not so much to convince the majority of Israelis that peace is good and the price acceptable, but first that peace is possible at all. Most Israelis have lost that hope, and its revival is absolutely vital on the way to peace (...)

Let's start with what I consider to be a false debate. First: "Hatred is a very bad advisor" writes Uri, and I will be the last to disagree with him. I know also that he will agree with me if I add that, in our political context, hatred is understandable. Second: "Israel is not South Africa". Of course it isn't, and every concrete reality is different from the other. Nevertheless, these two countries have some similarities: both are racist states with (different kinds of) apartheid systems (the literal meaning of apartheid being "structural separation"). Both countries were established as "European states" in a national/ethnic environment composed of non-European who were considered as a hostile environment, and rightly so.

We do also agree – and this is even more important – that in order to achieve substantial results in our struggle, we need to build a joint dynamics including the Palestinian national resistance, the Israeli anti-occupation forces and the international solidarity movement. Ten years ago, I call it "the winning triangle".

A lot in common indeed until comes Uri's misrepresentation of his political opponents: "(They) have despaired of the Israelis". If it would have been so, why those Israeli BDS campaigners would spare so much of their time in building, together with Uri Avnery, an Israeli movement against war, occupation and colonization? The true debate is not between those who aim to "change the Israeli society" and those who don't, but how and for what.

The political **goal** of Uri Avnery is "an Israeli-Palestinian peace", i.e. a compromise that should satisfy the majority of the two communities, on a symmetrical basis (in another important article, he called it "truth against truth"). Such symmetry is the result of another important political assumption by Avnery: the conflict in Palestine is a conflict between two national movements with equal legitimacy.

Many supporters of the BDS campaign disagree on both assumptions: our goal is not peace as such, because "peace" in itself doesn't mean anything (almost every war in modern history was initiated under the pretext of achieving peace). Peace is always the reflection of relation of forces when one side cannot impose to the other all what he considers being its legitimate rights.

Unlike Uri, our **goal** is the fulfillment of certain values like: basic individual and collective rights, end of domination and oppression, decolonization, equality, and as-much-justice-as-possible. In that framework, we obviously may support "peace initiatives" that can reduce the level of violence and/or achieve a certain amount of rights. In our strategy, however, this support to peace initiatives is not a goal in itself but merely a means to achieve the mentioned-above values and rights.

That difference about "peace" and "justice" is connected to the divergence concerning the second assumption of Uri Avnery, the symmetry between two equally legitimate national movements and aspirations.

For us, Zionism is not a national liberation movement but a **colonial movement**, and the State of Israel is and has always been a **settlers' colonial state**. Peace, or, better, justice, cannot be achieved without a total decolonization (one can say de-Zionisation) of the Israeli State; it is a precondition for the fulfillment of the legitimate rights of the Palestinians – whether refugees, living under military occupation or second-class citizens of Israel. Whether the final result of that de-colonization will be a "one-state" solution, two democratic states (i.e. not a "Jewish State"), a federation or any other institutional structure is secondary, and will ultimately be decided by the struggle itself and the level of participation of Israelis, if at all.

In that sense, Uri Avnery is wrong when he states that our divergences is about "one state" or "two states". As explained above, the divergence is on rights, decolonization and the principle of full equality. The form of the solution is, in my opinion, irrelevant as long as we are speaking about a solution in which the two peoples are living in freedom (without colonial relationships) and equality.

Another important divergence with Uri Avnery concerns the Israeli psyche and the dialectics between the Palestinian National liberation agenda and the so-call Israeli peace camp. While it is obvious that the Palestinian national movement needs as many Israeli allies as possible to achieve liberation as quick as possible and with as less suffering as possible for both people, one cannot expect the Palestinian movement to wait until Uri and the other Israeli anti-colonialists will convince the majority of the Israeli public opinion. For two reasons: first, because popular national movements do not wait to fight oppression and colonialism; second, because history has taught us that changes within the colonialist society has always been **the result of the liberation struggle**, and not the other way round: when the price for occupation is becoming too high, more and more people understand that it is nor worth to continue it.

Generally speaking, one can say that the Israeli mind is shaped by two realities, or, more accurately, one reality and one perception of reality. The reality shaping the Israeli psyche is the colonial reality of the Israeli existence, the feeling of being surrounded by a hostile environment which, to say the least, feels threaten by the dynamics of Zionist colonization. The other factor shaping Israeli collective mentality is anti-Semitism (real and constructed) strengthen by the experience of the Nazi judeocide.

Like any other people, the Israelis want to be accepted, loved even. They have, however a double difficulty: to pay the needed price for this acceptance, i.e. behaving in a civilized manner, and to trust the other in his attempt to normalize relations with them.

Yes, a hand extended for co-existence is needed, but **together** with an iron fist fighting for rights and freedom. The failure of the Oslo process confirms a very old lesson of history: any attempt for reconciliation **before** the fulfillment of rights strengthens the continuation of the colonial domination relationship. Without a price to be paid, why should the Israelis stop colonization, why should they risk a deep internal crisis?

This is where the BDS campaign is so relevant: it offers an international framework to act in order to help the Palestinian people achieving its legitimate rights, both on the institutional level (states and international institutions) and the civil society's one. On the one hand it is addressed to the international community, asking it to **sanction** a State that is systematically violating international law, UN resolutions, the Geneva Conventions and signed agreements; on the other hand, it is addressed to the international civil society to act, as individuals as well as social movements (trade-unions, parties, local councils, popular associations etc) to boycott goods, official representatives, institutions etc. that represent the colonial State of Israel.

Both tasks (boycott and sanctions) will eventually be a pressure of the Israeli people, pushing it to understand that occupation and colonization have a price, that violating the international rules may, sooner or later, made the State of Israel a paria-country, not welcomed in the civilized community of nations. Like South Africa in the last decades of apartheid. In that sense, and unlike Uri's claim, BDS is addressed to the Israeli public and, right now, is the only way to provoke a change in its attitude towards occupation/colonization. If one compares it to the anti-apartheid BDS campaign that took twenty years to start bearing real fruits, one cannot but be surprised how efficient the anti-Israeli occupation campaign has already been, and even in Israel we can already witness its first effects.

The BDS campaign was initiated by a broad coalition of Palestinian political and social movements. No Israeli who claims to support the national rights of the Palestinian people can, decently, turns it back to that campaign: after having claimed for years that "armed struggle is not the way", it will be outrageous that this strategy too will be disqualified by those Israeli activists. On the contrary, we have all together to join "Boycott from within" in order to provide an Israeli backup to that Palestinian initiative. It is the minimum we can do, it is the minimum we should do.