

Narrowing Academic Freedom, Discriminating against Israeli Nationals

A Response to the [AAUP Journal of Academic Freedom, Volume 4](#)

By Kenneth Waltzer

A recent round table of essays published in the *Journal of Academic Freedom*, an online publication of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), sought to bolster the case for an academic boycott of Israeli universities and scholars, seeking thereby to turn an organization long committed to values of academic freedom and fairness against those same values. Six of nine essays in the issue offered arguments for an academic boycott, taking stands against academic freedom and non-discrimination toward Israeli nationals.

Cary Nelson, a former AAUP president, in his strongly critical and thoughtful response to these articles, ably defended those values and also countered several misstatements of reality about the Middle East offered in the essays. But one single critical response did not make the volume a balanced or fair issue, for it was not conceived by editor Ashley Dawson, who backs the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, either as a broad or balanced exploration or even an open and fair political discussion of what might work to end Israeli occupation; it rather had the feeling of the old political tactic of packing a room or an event.

The episode is yet another chapter in the sordid, consistently failing, effort that has proceeded for several years under the auspices of Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) to de-legitimize Israel by creating an extensive boycott of Israeli institutions and scholars. The idea is thereby to turn these institutions and individuals into pariahs who take no part in—yes, are completely barred from, ostracized, and excluded from -- our ongoing conversations in the United States. It is asserted by those who have been waging this campaign that the institutions and individuals are complicit in a regime and involved with policies that secure Palestinian oppression or do things that serve the regime and otherwise legitimate or “whitewash” oppression. This is asserted by all the essayists without analysis or argument.

Sadly, not a single essay dwelled on the actual diversity and complexity of Israeli higher education or the wide range of Israeli scholarship and perspectives on Israel/Palestine; neither did a single essay note the extraordinarily large number of Israeli academics who stand against what is happening currently in the creeping politicization of Israeli higher education or the deepening Israeli occupation and expansion of the settlements. Not one essay, either, shocking to this historian, dwelled on the unhappy history of boycotts in the past that were aimed primarily at Jews and or how a boycott today against the Jewish state would differ from those yesterday against the Jews. Finally, not a single article made the case how barring members of the one sector in Israeli society that has made some concrete achievements in bridging Israeli-Palestinian differences would work to bring peace or greater justice in the Middle East, nor how excluding Israeli academics from our discourse about the Middle East would contribute to richer discussions or deeper understanding on American campuses here.

This whole matter is, in one sense, small potatoes: more noise from the rejectionist, one-state crowd, which knows how to throw epithets and offer self-righteous claims but not how fairly and accurately to describe what is a complex reality. But, in another sense, the attempt to capture the AAUP or occupy its journal for a position opposed to academic freedom is of grave symbolic importance to universities and especially to university Jewish Studies programs. I write as the Director of a Jewish Studies program at a Big Ten CIC institution and also as co-coordinator of the network of Jewish Studies directors in the Association for Jewish Studies. In many Jewish Studies programs in the United States, where in recent years study of Israel, of Israeli society and culture, and of Israeli relations with other states and peoples in the region have come to be highlighted and

critically explored, relationships with visiting Israeli academics and speakers, opportunities for exchanges with Israeli universities, and visits to and study by students in Israeli universities are absolutely important.

In my understanding, the academic boycott is a declaration to us in Jewish Studies programs that our academic freedom is on the line as well. In a massive reordering of Jewish life geographically during the past century, there have developed two centers of Jewish life in the post-Holocaust world: North America and Israel. A call on American institutions to boycott Israeli institutions and academics says to us who teach and research in Jewish Studies that we cannot study directly or explore fully half of contemporary Jewish life. Our programs have no right to exist and function like other centers or programs in universities, which regularly host visiting scholars and speakers, establish ongoing exchange relations with universities abroad, and send their students to study abroad in those universities. We cannot do, that is, what other programs focusing on China, or Turkey, or Russia, regularly do. All this is demanded while not even taking the trouble to specify carefully and concretely what these institutions have done or failed to do and to capably argue the case that they are pariahs, deserving ostracism.

Jewish Studies faculty and programs need to agree on a strong position in defense of our own and our students' freedoms. Put simply, Omar Barghouti of PACBI wants to prevent faculty and students from doing what he himself has done – interact with Israeli faculty, study in Israeli universities! The Jewish Studies Program at Michigan State University stands strongly against any such boycott. Our faculty has agreed to act forthrightly on behalf of academic freedom and non-discrimination involving opportunities for our faculty and students. We are proud that, with two hundred other university presidents, our university president Lou Anna K. Simon signed a statement in 2007 affirming that what is at stake here is “free intellectual exchange and scholarly activity.” Dr. Simon is able to see clearly that we must “stand in solidarity with those scholars who would be punished.” Actually my argument is that we would all be punished under a boycott. Academic freedom in a global context means increasing connectivity, expanding exchanges, acting inclusively to enrich the conversations, not barring scholars and proscribing institutions.

During the past two years, our MSU program has hosted a Schusterman Visiting Israeli artist, screenwriter Guy Meirson, who wrote the script for the anti-war film “Rock the Casbah,” and a Schusterman Visiting Israeli scholar, anthropologist Chen Bram, who is exploring Jewish-Muslim relations in one of his courses. This year we hosted Moshe Maoz from Hebrew University, one of the world's experts on Syria; another program at MSU, Global Studies, hosted him for a second lecture. Last summer we sent 32 students to study abroad in Israel at Hebrew University and in a second program, Green Israel, to tour Israel and work with several institutions on matters of environmentalism, where Israel is a leader. We have sent 150 students during the past 8 years to study in Israel at universities with which we have ongoing exchange relations, and we have supported them with a scholarship fund aimed at helping student leaders to study in Israel. Several such students have moved on to graduate study related to managing ethnic conflict and making peace in the Middle East and will form the next cadre of professionals seeking through NGO and diplomatic work to help make peace in the region.

Over the years, Israeli scholars have been among those whom we have invited to give our annual Serling Lecture on the Middle East or our annual Rabin Lecture on the Holocaust. Philosopher Avishai Margalit of Hebrew University gave a Serling lecture; historian Ilan Troen of Ben Gurion University gave one; Israeli journalist Gershon Gorenberg offered a critique of Israeli policies in his Serling lecture. Israeli historian Dalia Ofer gave a Holocaust lecture on the Warsaw ghetto. Cutting edge Israeli jazz musician Omer Avital who is blending Yemenite, Moroccan, and Israeli themes with American jazz, will perform this spring with his band. How will cutting off such exchanges and appearances, ending exchanges with Israeli universities, and keeping our students at home improve things for anyone?

The boycott proponents writing in the *Journal of Academic Freedom*, including great and respected historian Joan Scott, hold out a starkly radical and genuinely narrowing view for universities that dialogue in the global academy should be open only to those who agree on what are right beliefs and identify themselves with a specific political agenda, that of postcolonial progressives. They do so by seeking to set up a method of exclusion that is discriminatory based on nationality, and which, since these folks no doubt would include Israeli Arabs but exclude Israeli Jews, is also racist. They seek to narrow, not broaden, the conversation, and they seek to bar from contact with American faculty and students and university communities Israeli academics and journalists who have special expertise to share. It would be horrific if anyone in the AAUP or on American campuses were listening to them at all.

Kenneth Waltzer is a professor and director of the Jewish Studies Program at Michigan State University