

Response to *JAF* Volume Four

By Emily Budick

As an American-Israeli academic I feel obliged to add a few words to the current discussion in AAUP's *Journal of Academic Freedom* on boycotting Israeli academics and academic institutions. Like many of my colleagues here, I do not dispute that there is inequality in the state of Israel. Like many of us (not only in academe) I believe in the right of Palestinians to a state of their own. What divides many of us politically in Israel is not whether we want a Palestinian state alongside Israel, but how that is to be achieved without endangering Israel. Israel is a nation among nations, with the problems of nations. I do not doubt that objectionable statements have been made in Israeli classrooms. They've been made in American classrooms as well. But Israel is *not* an apartheid state; it is not a racist state; it is not a nation that denies education to its different populations; nor does it withhold essential services in the fields of education, medicine, and the like. Quite the contrary. Though likely not a top item in world news, Israeli hospitals have been receiving and treating wounded refugees from the Syrian conflict. Israeli hospitals and universities serve all its populations, plus foreign populations as well.

Israel stopped being anything approximating an apartheid state for me 20 years ago when my deceased son's liver was transplanted into an Arab woman from Ramallah by an Arab surgeon at Hadassah hospital. Over the years I have taken great pride in the achievements of my Arab and Palestinian students. Last year one of my former graduate students became the first woman mayor of Bethlehem. I was similarly thrilled when several Palestinian students greeted me the first day of classes this year to bring regards from another former student of mine who was their teacher at the Arab university where they'd done their undergraduate degrees and who had encouraged them to do their graduate work at Hebrew University. Last year a full 50 percent of my Introduction to American Literature class was populated by Arab and Palestinian students. These are anecdotal evidences to be sure. But they are no less indicative of the state of things in Israel than quoting a right-wing academic, with whose opinions many of us would disagree.

Perhaps boycotters believe that Palestinians deserve a less good education than their own students receive, but we at Israeli universities are committed to providing all of our students – and especially those who are in any way disadvantaged on their way to higher education (not all of them non-Jews or non-Israelis) – with the full extent of our expertise, especially as we develop and deepen our learning through research, writing, international conferences (in Israel and abroad), not to mention residence at universities outside of Israel. If you want to stop Palestinian progress, then boycott the

Israeli academics who contribute (along with Palestinian and Arab teachers) to their education and well-being. If you want to further the rights and liberties of Palestinians, then help us continue to provide Palestinian students with the best education we can. Indeed: come join us.

Education alone cannot resolve every conflict. But would anyone dispute the important role played by American institutions of higher learning in reversing both the reality and the accumulated consequences of anti-Semitism, racism, sexism, and xenophobia in the United States, both at the universities and in the society at large. Remarkable academics like the late Emory Elliot pioneered the field of International American Studies such that American Americanists could come to see themselves from afar and counter the idea of American exceptionalism dominant in the US in the 1960s. To see themselves from afar Americans first had to *be* afar such that they could see themselves in perspective. Would a European boycott have served the interests of America's minority groups better than the American community's own self-scrutiny? Not to say, in the least, that that job of self-scrutiny, in the US, as elsewhere, is over.

The boycott community might keep in mind that there are Israeli Arabs who identify as Israelis, Israeli Arabs who identify as Palestinians, Palestinians who seek Israeli citizenship, and Palestinians who might well want to be incorporated into Israel rather than a Palestinian state, when one exists. Who will the boycotters boycott? And on what basis? Race? Place of birth? Mother's religion? The boycott community and Palestinians (whether in Palestine or abroad) have no more right to determine people's allegiance and identity than the government of Israel.

To pick up Stanley Fish's imagery in his own contribution to this discussion, academics can choose to hide their heads in the sand or to kick sand in the faces of others. Or they can do the hard work of thinking concretely and constructively with other academics, even when those academics belong to different national entities, guilty of different national crimes. It may well be the case that Israelis will have to tend their own garden. I hope that that will not be the case. I hope that Israelis (Jewish and Arab) will go forward with Palestinians, Americans, and others to work toward goals that, as academics, we all agree are essential to whatever we imagine human value to be.

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