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ACADEMICS AGAINST ISRAEL

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
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Many are under the impression that individuals in academia are by definition people who judge events from an unbiased, rational viewpoint. After all, those who are members of the faculties of universities have spent years of study learning how to analyze and evaluate material in their discipline in order to understand underlying phenomena.

Shouldn't we then expect that people with this sort of training would approach political situations armed with logic and not let emotions and opinions cloud their judgment? Unfortunately, for many academics, particularly those in England and Europe, when it comes to Israel nothing could be further from the truth.

For the past few years there has been growing support overseas among academics in support of the Palestinians. It is not just that these academics support the Palestinian call for an independent state; some condemn - in the harshest of terms - Israel's attempts to defend itself from homicide bombers and other terrorist acts. In their twisted view it is not Palestinian terrorists but Israel that is the aggressor.

Some have gone so far as to say that Israel is perpetrating a 'holocaust' on the Palestinians. These views have led to a call for a boycott against Israeli academics and other discriminatory actions against Israelis simply because they are Israelis.

On April 6, 2002, an open letter was published in the British newspaper The Guardian. It called for a European boycott of 'cultural and research links with Israel at a European or national level until such time as the Israeli government abides by UN resolutions and opens serious peace negotiations with the Palestinians along the lines of the recent Saudi peace plan.'

The letter was signed by 125 academics. One of them was Professor Eva Jablonka of Tel-Aviv University. (See www.btinternet.com/~reveuse/acffreeedom.htm for more. Please note that much of the information here is based on this website.)

One might think that the call for such action was merely the efforts of some 'lunatic fringe' academics. After all, virtually every large group has people affiliated with it whose views do not reflect at all the views of the vast majority of the members of the group. But this was not the case.

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On April 13, NATFHE (the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education) passed a resolution calling for an academic boycott of Israel.

On April 18, The Independent published an article by Tom Wilson, head of the association's universities department, titled 'Is It Time To Take Sides'? He suggested such measures as 'recalling UK staff or students in Israel; suspending collaborative research; declining to publish in Israeli journals; refusing to attend conferences, and so on ...'

There were, of course, those who expressed strong opposition to

this call for an Israeli boycott. These included: Philippe Busquin, European Union commissioner for research, who released a press statement opposing the boycott; the UK scientific magazine Nature, which published an editorial entitled 'Don't Boycott Israel's Scientists'; Dr Leonid Ryzhik of the University of Chicago and 55 other academics who wrote to The Guardian urging academia to oppose the boycott; Professor Menachem Magidor, president of Hebrew University, who was interviewed by The Times Higher Education Supplement on May 17 and 'expressed anger at suggestions for an academic boycott of Israel by British and other European academics.'

The November 17, 2002, edition of the British newspaper The Sunday Telegraph reported that Tony Blair has told Britain's chief rabbi that he will 'do anything necessary' to stop the academic boycott of Israeli scholars at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and

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Technology.'

The paper went on to add that 'The prime minister is appalled by discrimination against academics on the grounds of their race or nationality. He believes that universities must send a clear signal that this will not be tolerated,' said a Downing Street aide.

Despite these protests and others, the boycott was definitely implemented. An article in the December 12, 2002 issue of The Guardian entitled 'British Academic Boycott of Israel Gathers Pace' reported:

"Evidence is growing that a British boycott of Israeli academics is gathering pace. British academics have delivered a series of snubs to their Israeli counterparts since the idea of a boycott first gained ground in the spring. In interviews with The Guardian, British and Israeli academics listed various incidents in which visits, research projects and publication of articles have been blocked.

"Dr. Oren Yiftachel, a left-wing Israeli academic at Ben Gurion University, complained that an article he had co-authored with a Palestinian was initially rejected by the respected British journal Political Geography. He said it was returned to him unopened with a note stating that Political Geography could not accept a submission from Israel."

Mona Baker

Mona Baker is the director of Centre for Translation and Intercultural Studies at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST). "Based in Manchester, UMIST is a specialist university concentrating on science, engineering, technology, management and languages," according to Professor John Garside, principal and vice chancellor of UMIST. (His position is equivalent to that of a president of an American university.) Ms Baker, a native Egyptian, has worked as a professional translator for over 20 years and has been involved in training translators for some 10 years or so. She has been at UMIST since 1995.

On April 8, Professor Baker e-mailed her colleagues in the European Society for Translation Studies (EST) asking them to support the boycott. Dr. Miriam Shlesinger explained why she could not support such a measure in her reply the same day. Dr. Shlesinger, an Israeli, was a member of the editorial board of The Translator, a journal owned and operated by Mona Baker.

On May 23, Professor Baker e-mailed Dr. Shlesinger asking her to resign from the editorial board of The Translator, and indicating that she would be asking the same of Professor Gideon Touro, another Israeli on the editorial board of another journal controlled by Ms. Baker. Dr. Shlesinger refused to resign. On June 6 she received an e-mail from Professor Baker informing her that she had been dismissed.

On June 8, Professor Baker wrote to Professor Touro offering him a similar choice: resignation or dismissal. Professor Touro also refused to resign, and asked Professor Baker to make it clear that he was appointed as a scholar and unappointed as an Israeli.'

Professors Shlesinger and Touro were dismissed not because their work was found lacking, but simply because they are Israelis who refused to support the boycott.

Andrew Wilkie

Andrew Wilkie is a professor of molecular genetics at Oxford University. He is apparently intent upon actions that are part of the unofficial boycott of Israeli scientists. The Oxford professor caused a stir in the worldwide science community in June 2003 when, via e-mail, he told 26-year-old Amit Duvshani, who had recently completed a Master's degree at Tel Aviv University and was applying for a graduate student position, that he objected to Israeli treatment of Palestinians and would not take as a student anybody who'd served in the Israeli army. (Army service is, of course, compulsory in Israel.)

On July 4, Oxford University announced that it would refer Professor Wilkie to a disciplinary panel that could recommend warnings, dismissal, or removal from office for his refusal to consider Duvshani's application because of his nationality. Wilkie 'will not be taking part in the selection of any members of staff or students? during the panel's deliberations, the university said.

"Based on the information that was collected during this process, and in the light of all the circumstances, particularly the importance attached by the University to fair processes of selection, the vice-chancellor, Sir Colin Lucas, has taken the view that this matter should be referred for consideration by the University's disciplinary panel for academic staff, known as the Visitation Board," Oxford said in a statement.

Why Israel?

At this point the reader may be wondering why Israeli academics have been singled out for boycott. After all, there most are many countries which have and continue to treat groups residing within their borders in a manner that can only be described as most cruel and brutal - certainly far worse than what the Palestinians have experienced at the hands of the Israelis.

Sudan is just one of many cases. "The National Islamic Front is employing murder, rape, and torture to eradicate Christianity from Sudan. Christian villages are burned to the ground and raided. Christian men are killed. Christian women are enslaved and raped. Christian children are sold into slavery. Priests are tortured, imprisoned, and even crucified. Since 1983, more than one million Sudanese Christians have been killed." (www.terraviva.pt/guincho/2104/genocide/sudan.html)

Why has no boycott of academics from the Sudan been proposed by university professors in England and the rest of Europe?

For a detailed discussion of this double standard, go to www.btinternet.com/~revenue/acfreesdom.htm, where you'll read: "One wonders...why Israel has been singled out in this way. Why is there no boycott of Chinese academics because of atrocities committed against Tibet, for example"

In the latter case, it is surely because governments and academics recognize that it is words and ideas that break down barriers; not violence or exclusion. In the former case one senses a darker agenda. It is not true that everyone who criticizes Israel is anti-Semitic. Many of the signatories to the boycott are Jews. It is true to say that every anti-Semite criticizes Israel. In the present climate, they are given what amounts to a legitimate outlet for their racism and hatred by seeming to be part of a liberal crusade.

"Speaking to the Jerusalem Post on 19 July, Dame Ruth Deech of St Anne's College, Oxford, said, "Sadly, it's almost as if anti-Semitism has been repressed and not respectable for the last 50 years and that effect has worn off. Israel has provided a pretext for people with that sort of feeling. One cannot separate anti-Israel from anti-Jewish, when you look at the result: as soon as Israel is said to behave badly, the retaliation is to bomb a synagogue, or to attack Jews in the street." "

Perhaps a good indication of the motivations of those who support the boycott is to be found in the statements of Professor Baker, who claims that she is not anti-Semitic. She found herself inundated with e-mails and letters condemning her actions in the strongest terms, with many of them calling for her resignation and labeling her an anti-Semite.

Baker eventually showed her true colors; apparently irked by transatlantic criticism from Harvard's Stephen Greenblatt, an authority on Shakespeare and the current president of the Modern Language Association, she decided to grant an interview to the Sunday Telegraph of London. She herself is the victim, Baker told the Telegraph: "There is a large intimidation machine out there," she claimed (organized by international bankers, one supposes). This 'machine' means to silence all critical commentary on Israeli government policy. And ?the Americans are the worst offenders."

But, she cheekily added, "I'm damned if I'm going to be intimidated." And then, as if to prove her critics right, Baker likened Israel to Nazi Germany: "Israel has gone beyond just war crimes. It is horrific what is going on there. Many of us would like to talk about it as some kind of Holocaust which the world will eventually wake up to, much too late, of course, as they did with the last one."

It is worth noting that Baker has been linked to Holocaust denier David Irving. In his article "Don't Play the Nutty Professor with David Irving," which appeared in The Times of London on December 12, 2002, Giles Coren wrote: "Professor Mona Baker, the leader of the movement to boycott Israeli academics, is in cahoots with Britain's leading anti-Semitic lunatic, David Irving.... I came upon a letter of protest from Herr Irving to Amazon.co.uk about the nature of its advertising in Israel, which began as follows: "Dear Amazon, I have been shocked to get an e-mail from Prof. Mona Baker of the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology which indicated that your company advertises itself in the Israeli press via a logo which reads: "Buy Amazon.Com and Support Israel" and which displays an Israeli flag."

"...Is the potty Holocaust denier the sort of chap [Baker] sees as a possible political collaborator? One is so often implored to remember that not all anti-Zionists are anti-Semites. But not all of them aren't. And Irving is one who is. His aversion to Israel is based not on political but racial revulsion.... It is not impossible that Mona Baker is a rational woman who thinks that her boycott is the best way to liberate the disfranchised Palestinians. And it is also not impossible that she is a misguided nutter. It is not for a miserable clown like me to judge. But if she does not want her attempts to legislate against a group of people who just happen to be Jewish to come up smelling of Hitler, then she should avoid soliciting the support of his most prominent modern disciple." "

The reader might expect that Baker by now would have been dismissed from her position at the University of Manchester. This has not occurred. After an investigation it was decided that there was nothing that UMIST could do, since Baker was acting as a private person when she dismissed the two Israeli academics from the two journals she owns and controls.

As for Professor Wilkie, we shall have to wait for the results of the disciplinary panel. No matter what the result, one cannot help but wonder if Professors Baker and Wilkie and others of their ilk are acting from something more than pro-Palestinian sentiments. Sadly, it seems that the disease of anti-Semitism is alive and well in certain academic circles.

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