

BDS and the Dynamics of Self-Righteous Moralism

Dan Avnon

Introduction

In the course of the years 2012 to 2014 I was subject to the actions of the Sydney chapter of the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement, led by a University of Sydney faculty member, Professor Jake Lynch. For Lynch and his associates I was an embodied representation of Israel, a country whose policies they detest and whose scholars and scientists they boycott.

I have never previously been singled out for boycott merely because of my being a Jewish-Israeli scholar, and surely have never been boycotted by the left-wing edges of political activism, whereas, ironically, in Israel I have occasionally been condemned by academic and non-academic self-anointed Jewish and patriotic zealots. The novelty of this experience – being boycotted due to my national identity and organisational affiliation— is in the backdrop of my reflections.

I will address two aspects of my BDS experiences: I'll explain how by my being subjected to their propaganda, leaflets and demonstrations, the BDS activists enabled me to realise that their actual goal is to end Israel's existence as an independent Jewish state. That's the political aspect.

In addition, my experiences during the two years of having my image formed and used by various political players provided me with an opportunity to reflect on an attendant dimension of the situation: the morality of protagonists from the edges of both the pro- and anti-BDS divide. From this perspective, I'll raise some initial speculations about an overlooked political vice and its harmful effects: self-righteous moralism.¹ I will relate a few episodes that cause or lead me to suggest that self-righteousness may be a particular sensation (of self) that transforms potentially sensitive and sensible people into insensitive and dogmatic champions of absolute justice: Self-made, if you will.

Dan Avnon

The Background

I heard about the Sir Zelman Cowen University of Sydney-Hebrew University of Jerusalem faculty exchange fellowship in the course of a chance encounter with a colleague who had been a recipient of this fellowship. It was on a late Thursday afternoon, and the deadline for application was less than a week away. Since I had no prior contacts in Australia, I perused the University of Sydney's website, seeking scholars who would perhaps be interested in sponsoring my application for this grant. I then dashed off a rather hurried email to five unwitting colleagues. Four of them, all senior scholars at the University of Sydney, responded within a couple of hours, agreeing to my using their names on my application form. A fifth, the director of the University of Sydney's Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, Jake Lynch, who unbeknown to me was a zealous supporter of the BDS movement,² sent me a surprising response.

Here are the transcripts of my email correspondence with Professor Lynch.³ The time listed is Israeli local time:

16/11/2012 02:02

Dear Professor Lynch:

I apologise for dropping into your inbox without an introduction. I am the former Head of the Federmann School of Public Policy and Governance at the Hebrew University, and a political theorist at the Department of Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In my political philosophy niche I specialise in the philosophy of Martin Buber.

I will be on Sabbatical leave during the 2013-14 academic year. I would like to spend time in Australia to learn about Australia's civic education policy and curriculum. This is an area of research (and of active, hands-on curriculum development) that has been at the core of my work in the past decade. This work included the writing and implementation of Israel's only (State-sanctioned) program in civics written for joint Jewish-Arab, religious/non-religious high-school kids.

I intend to devote my sabbatical to a comparative study of civic education in societies undergoing demographic (and consequently cultural) changes.

As part of my sabbatical I would like to come to Sydney for two months in 2014 to work on this research. I was alerted today to

BDS and the Dynamics of Self-Righteous Moralism

the possibility of applying to a Hebrew University – University of Sydney fellowship that would fund part of my stay at the University. The application deadline is tomorrow. So, I am working frenetically to get this done on time.

My (embarrassingly urgent) request is: can I mention you as a contact person at your University? I have gone through the list of faculty and schools at the University of Sydney, and you seem to be a colleague whom I would like to meet when I am there. This courtesy will enable me to apply.

Attached are the application forms, partially completed. I attach them so that you can see who I am (academically). No need for you to do anything with or about them.

Thank you for your attention. I hope that you can reply “yes” and this will enable me to complete the application and hope for the best ...

Best wishes,
Dan Avnon

16/11/2012 04:23

Dear Professor Avnon,

Thank you for your email, no apologies necessary.

Indeed, it is I who must apologise to you, for I am bound, by our Centre’s policy, to decline your request. My apology to you is on a personal level, for neither I nor the Centre have anything against you – and your research sounds interesting and worthwhile. However, we are supporters of the campaign of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions, and that includes the call for an academic boycott of Israeli universities.

I have attached the letter I wrote to the University Vice Chancellor, after a meeting of my Centre’s governing Council, and a separate meeting open to the whole university community, when we adopted the policy – along with his response.

Our Centre’s policy is not the policy of the University, as you will see, but it does foreclose our entering into any such arrangements as you propose.

Yours sincerely,— Jake
Associate Professor Jake Lynch,
BA, Dip Journalism Studies, PhD
Director, Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies

Dan Avnon

I sent the email late at night (02:02), and Jake Lynch's reply arrived at 04:23, when I was asleep. When I opened my inbox a few hours later I found his response. Since the response was written in apparently personal terms – ***“on a personal level, for neither I nor the Centre have anything against you”*** – I naively assumed that this is indeed a personal communication and that a person-to-person response is in order. Hence my response:

16/11/2012 11:02

Dear Jake (if I may) –

I had no idea that this is your stand, and that the specific fellowship to which I am applying is a symbol of what you oppose!

I hope to have the opportunity to discuss this issue with you. As an opening comment, I find it ironic ... [that for you I am] a symbol of all that you find reprehensible. It is ironic because like myself, many (probably most) [Israeli] intellectuals and scholars in relevant fields are doing our best to effect change in Israeli political culture. We pay prices for going against the institutional grain. And then we turn around and meet such a “blind to the person” policy.

One common tendency that must be changed if we ever want to live sane lives is to debunk categorical and stereotypical thinking when dealing with human beings. I attach an article that I wrote precisely on this issue.⁴ You need not read beyond the first two pages. The gist of what I have to say about this is there.

There is so much to be said about this thorny issue (between principle and practice) ... Should I have the good fortune of receiving this fellowship and coming to Sydney, perhaps we'll meet (personally) and explore fresh looks at the principled position that you outlined in your letter.

Best personal wishes,
Dan

Jake Lynch never responded to my email. I later learned from University of Sydney colleagues that within a few minutes of sending his reply to me he had sent a copy of my request and his response to a host of recipients, apparently in order to gain credit for his ability to boycott Israelis. As for me, I filed this correspondence and went on with my life, for a while.

Developments

In late November 2012, a week after my non-dialogical exchange with Jake Lynch, I was contacted by an Australian journalist, Christian Kerr of *The Australian*, who was writing a story about Lynch's decision to boycott me.⁵ From the moment of front-page publication of Kerr's report on 6 December 2012, Jake Lynch's decision to publicise my personal request and to trumpet it as his anti-Israel catch of the year created for me a public persona with a life of its own. What attracted attention in Australia and elsewhere was the fact that Lynch had chosen to boycott a scholar whose work pro-actively promotes civic equality in Israel between majority Jews and minority Palestinian-Israeli Arabs. This curious choice helped anti-BDS activists point to deep contradictions between BDS claims to promote social justice in Israel on the one hand, while boycotting someone associated with that very activity on the other hand.

From the distance of my Jerusalem computer, it seemed to me that Lynch's actions had backfired. The Dean of the University of Sydney's Faculty of Humanities, Professor Duncan Iveson, stood up for the basic values that underpin scholarly exchange and scientific research.⁶ Various items in the Australian press indicated that by and large the BDS movement was a marginal, peripheral fringe group. Many Australian citizens, scholars and a few public figures wrote to me private emails with touching messages of support, expressing their disdain for BDS activism and their objection to the use of university positions as bully pulpits.

Unknown to my newfound Australian friends and colleagues, the emphasis in the Australian press on my public record in promoting democratic civic education in Israel made the rounds to Israel. This juicy item was picked up by Israeli right-wing activists. They pounced on the news from Down Under with a mixture of rage and unrestrained glee. In a thundering op-ed titled "Serves him Right!" one of Israel's prominent publicists, Ben-Dror Yamini, tore into my Israeli public persona. In that hatchet job he revelled in the fact that I was subject to a dose of BDS activism: "Professor Dan Avnon tried to incite against the Jewish State, and was boycotted because he is Israeli. He suddenly understood that there aren't personal exemptions for an ingratiating academic." He then went on to present a negative portrayal of my advocacy of citizenship studies in Israel. It culminated with the following words: "As part of his academic activities Avnon tried to influence citizenship studies in a very particular direction ... [His publications] clarify that Israeli academia has become the long

arm of politics. Primarily the politics of the left and of the radical left.”⁷

To claim that I incited against the State of Israel is a blatant lie. I feel strongly about our right to an independent political existence, and cannot have been caught claiming otherwise, anytime, anywhere. I am compelled to add that in addition to being a descendant of a relatively longstanding Jewish-Palestinian family (my maternal forefather first came to Ottoman Palestine in 1829, and settled there in 1831), my father’s Lithuanian Jewish family was liquidated by the Nazis in the 1941- 1944 Ponary forest massacres.⁸ So from both branches of my parents’ families I have inherited cultural and historical contexts that root me firmly in the ancient land and in the modern State of Israel. I know – not merely believe – that as long as the world is divided into territorial nation-states, then we too need this nation-state of the Jewish people. I also know that we need this country to be just and humane. My actions have always been commensurate with these convictions and beliefs.

As for the charge that I developed programs in civics that assumed that Israel’s citizenry should understand the logic of a democratically constituted polity — I admit the indictment, proudly. I am proud of the fact that I taught quite a number of educators who are doing a great uphill job reforming civics education in Israel. I am also proud of the fact that despite their wide plurality of perspectives, all of my associates — scholars, educators, teachers and policy makers — fit the democratic mould (for examples see Avnon and Benziman 2009, Avnon 2012) In my edited books or educational initiatives, I do not host fascists, religious fanatics or other agents whose prejudice is masked under respectable academic garb.

Finally, I am proud of the fact that all of the programs that I initiated in schools and in academia included participants from across the spectrum of Israel’s society, religious and non-religious, Jews and non-Jews. In all programs we have made special efforts to enable socially deprived members to access the education we could offer at or under the auspices of the Hebrew University. So if these activities are considered “left,” “radical” or perhaps both — then I carry this indictment too as a badge of honour.

So much for my being castigated by nationalist ultra-patriots in Israel. The public chain of events generated by the ongoing attacks and counter attacks between pro-BDS activists and the many who rallied against them drew the attention of an additional actor. Shurat HaDin, an Israeli organisation that specialises in “lawfare” against anti-Israel terrorist organisations,⁹ decided to intervene in the

BDS and the Dynamics of Self-Righteous Moralism

Australian case and use this incident as an opportunity to stem the rise of BDS activism in Australia and in the rest of the world. In July 2013 they filed a complaint against Jake Lynch with the Australian Human Rights Commission, under section 46P of the Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986 (AHRCA), alleging unlawful discrimination under the Racial Discrimination Act 1975. The AHRC did not accept the complaint. In December 2013 Shurat HaDin moved up the legal ladder, and filed a statement of claim against Jake Lynch in the Australian Federal Court.¹⁰

The statement of claim included “The Avnon Acts,” a series of discriminatory practices to which Professor Dan Avnon had been subject.¹¹ Shurat HaDin never contacted me, never consulted with me nor ever asked for my permission or advice on this matter yet nevertheless decided to file a lawsuit against Jake Lynch on behalf of apparent victims of BDS activities, using my case as the linchpin of the campaign. This ill-advised initiative was a turning point in the Australian BDS story, and provided the Australian BDS activists an opportunity to regroup and position themselves as victims.

I include in this review reference to the Shurat HaDin law case due to their exemplifying what I had already noted when observing Jake Lynch’s action. They too seemed to have been acting along lines commensurate with their moralism. Their actions added perspective to my thoughts about the impact of rigidly self-righteous political actors on the quality and effects of civic activism. It seems to me that the various activists who converged around the Australian BDS campaign used my public persona — most of it conjured as reflections of their interests — as an opportunity to lambast one another’s perception of reality, each using his absolute sense of self-righteous moralism to go after the other’s equally unqualified sense of rectitude.¹²

This review of developments is of course subjective and surely incomplete. I have sketched this course of events so as to move on to address the two issues I have undertaken to highlight. First, I’ll present arguments that seem to me sufficient to convince readers that BDS is a dishonest project that may be misleading good-intended activists to adopt practices that cause unintended, harmful consequences. Then I’ll return to think a bit more about self-righteous moralism, an aspect of these events that may be relevant beyond this particular skirmish.

Why I oppose the BDS movement: Their deceptive goals

There are many reasoned and at times passionate discourses against the BDS movement.¹³ I won’t try to summarise these claims; they are

Dan Avnon

readily available to anyone with access to the internet and to university libraries and data bases. I'll highlight my impression that the activities of the academic boycotters are in fact part of a broader and deeply troubling agenda, to undermine the very existence of Israel.

Let's begin with the BDS movement's declared goals. Without delving into the intricacies of the BDS program, the summary of its goals are as follows:

Ending its occupation and colonisation of all Arab lands occupied in June 1967 and dismantling the Wall; Recognising the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.¹⁴

The goals seem to be focused on specific policies or practices. But anyone who knows anything about the circumstances of the founding of Israel knows that the goals are *in fact* oriented to ending Israel's existence as a Jewish nation-state. For example, unwitting supporters of BDS read the words "ending the occupation and colonisation" and probably think that the 1967 war was a pre-planned attempt to colonise areas that in fact were captured as part of a war of self-defence; they hear "dismantling the Wall" [capital W in original wording] and are moved to action by evocative images of the Berlin Wall and the Pink Floyd Wall, with their respective bricks and hoped-for downfalls; they read "rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel" and are aroused to action by the evocative mention of universal civic rights; finally, they are summoned to support refugees in terms of a UN resolution 194, without knowing when and in which context that resolution was adopted. The language is appealing, using catchy metaphors and playing on liberal sentiments through reference to colonisation, international law and human rights language games.

This rhetoric obfuscates realities. Let's consider the first goal. The combination of fences and walls separating parts of pre-1967 Israel and the West Bank (also referred to as "the occupied territories" and "Judaea and Samaria") were built in the course of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Their purpose was to radically reduce infiltration of suicide and other forms of terrorism. This purpose was by and large achieved, and on this account not objectionable. This physical barrier is objectionable when and where it has been built on Palestinian land and when it causes illegal, unwarranted and at

BDS and the Dynamics of Self-Righteous Moralism

times outrageous misery to the Palestinian populace. So there are specific injustices that are effects of the wall. But there are also merits to this land obstacle to terrorist attacks. The rhetoric of BDS activists, oblivious to the many dimensions of the issue and dedicated to “dismantling the Wall,” may be useful for arousing sentiments, but is actually oblivious to context and to circumstance.

The second goal, with which I am more intimately involved, implies that all of Israel’s Arab-Palestinian citizens are in such a sorry state that they need immediate and urgent international support. This is so far from the facts. As I write these words, the Arab political parties of Israel who had joined forces to run as one alliance in Israel’s 2015 parliamentary elections, garnished votes that elected thirteen of their lists’ members to the Israeli Knesset. They overcame considerable inner rivalry and friction and came together because they realised that political power in Israel’s democracy will enable them access to resources that can better the lot of their constituencies. That is how democracies work. This political alliance is a sign of positive developments in the status and level of integration of Israel’s Arab citizenry.

While BDS activists are focusing on the one Middle Eastern Arab society that is doing relatively well in terms of democratic integration, they overlook Arab societies that are in real and dire need. These societies are just beyond Israel’s boundaries. What about the plight of millions of citizens of Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Sudan? Of women in Saudi Arabia? Of pro-democracy activists in Egypt? I could go on.¹⁵ My point is to put events in proportion: Israeli Arab-Palestinians are fighting an uphill, in many respects successful battle for equality. I share that struggle and their aspirations. There are deeply embedded forms of institutional discrimination that must be opposed and removed. I share that goal too, and have done my best to support Arab colleagues who are actively fighting for and asserting their rights. So this is a vibrant and major issue in Israel’s democracy. With this in mind, one wonders why launch an international campaign against Israel and its treatment of its Arab citizens while hundreds of thousands of Arabs are being slaughtered and millions dispossessed throughout the Middle East? Why are BDS activists committed to securing rights for a populace who lives in one of the sole stable and democratic states in the Middle East? There is an aspect of political life called judgment, a human capacity that is tempered by a sense of proportion. These are evidently lacking among BDS adherents.

It may be that pro-BDS supporters do not know that Israel is a

democracy. Well, it is. Like most democracies, Israel's too is imperfect. But that is not uncommon. Democracy is a regime type that actually assumes human and social imperfection, and enables processes that seek to continually improve social, economic and political qualities of life. Like other post-colonial democracies, Israelis too debate issues of majority-minority relations and questions of discrimination and racial prejudices. Such issues are continually discussed in our public spheres. The debates include those who press forward the need to ensure and deepen Arab-Israeli Palestinian rights, especially in the face of racism and discrimination. In the decades since the founding of the state there have been advances and drawbacks on this particular front. Yet this overall positive development of the status and conditions of Israel's Arab-Palestinian citizenry does not matter to BDS activists. For them the ultimate goal is not to advance rights but rather to weaken Israeli academia as part of the overall goal of weakening Israel as a state of the Jewish people. Otherwise why would they boycott a scholar who wanted to learn from Australian attempts to develop programs in civic education that address the discriminatory past in order to advance toward greater consolidation of democratic values and practices?

The latter question has its answer in the BDS movement's third goal. While blatantly partisan, anti-Israeli and lacking in complex perspectives, the aforementioned first and second goals may still be considered as addressing particular policies. Yet the third "goal" is actually the endgame. To present the goal of BDS as the return of all 1948 refugees and their descendants to their original homes and properties reveals the reasoning and aims of those who fund and support this movement. This goal ignores the sorry and tragic fact that the 1948 war was instigated by the Arab League due to their opposition to the United Nations November 1947 resolution 181. Resolution 194 — "the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194" — was adopted in December 1948. It was enacted after a ceasefire had been declared between representatives of the Jewish State (established under UN resolution) and representatives of the various Arab invaders. Decision 194 did not foresee that the temporary 1949 lines of armistice, later known as the "pre-1967 boundaries," would for all purposes delineate the boundaries of the Jewish state. Regretfully, it did not recommend going ahead with the two-state solution and founding an Arab-Palestinian state on lands originally allotted to the Arab state and not captured by Israel in the course of its 1948 War of

BDS and the Dynamics of Self-Righteous Moralism

independence. The land not taken by Israel, including the Old City of Jerusalem, became part of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan – that is, apart from the Gaza strip, which eventually came under Egyptian sovereignty.

Let's be clear: the Arab countries could have enabled a Palestinian state in 1948 (in accordance with decision 181) or could have established a smaller temporary state in 1949 (after decision 194), and from that position could have negotiated a final settlement of boundaries, refugees and other issues already determined in 181 but not implemented due to their rejection of the very notion of a Jewish state. They did not do this and opted to freeze the status of the 1949 refugees for an indefinite period of time through the establishment of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).¹⁶ It is now the year 2015. To call in the year 2015 for return of all refugees and their descendants to the Jewish State of Israel on the basis of decision 194, while disregarding all that transpired since December 1948, is not merely a protest against specific policies. It exposes the BDS's actual purpose: the destruction of Israel by advocating the return of Palestinians to their ancestral homes. This is tantamount to advocating the dismantling of Sydney — including the grounds on which Jake Lynch teaches “Peace and Conflict Studies” — and returning these lands to their pre-colonisation Aboriginal inhabitants.

I raise these points in this manner because my strong impression from three years of exposure to the rhetoric and actions of anti-Israel BDS activists is that this movement is a cleverly designed tool used in the service of ending Israel's existence as a sovereign Jewish State.¹⁷ That is why Jake Lynch and his ilk can boycott Israeli academia and Israeli academics without giving a second glance at whom or what they are boycotting. “Are you a Jewish Israeli scholar who works in an Israeli University?” “Yes.” “Aha! Gotcha! A Zionist occupier! Out you go! BDS on you and yours!”¹⁸

The absurdity of the logic and apparent policy implications of the BDS movement can be exemplified by considering the following facts: In 1834 one of my forefathers, Orthodox Hasidic Rabbi Israel Beck, living in the Ottoman province of Palestine, was granted rights to a plot of land on one of the Galilee's highest mountains. The giver was the ruler of the hour, Ottoman Pasha Ibrahim. Rabbi Beck went ahead and established an agricultural settlement that was inhabited by over a hundred members of his Hasidic community. In 1839 the ruler was deposed, a new ruler from a different Ottoman faction

ascended to political power in Palestine. The shift in balance of power emboldened Rabbi Beck's Druze neighbors, who gave him and his community twenty four hours to pack their belongings and leave that land. So off they went (to Jerusalem). According to the logic of BDS, I and the many thousands of Rabbi Beck's descendants should now march up there and reclaim our land.

These quick comments are enough for me to oppose the BDS movement. I am an Israeli, and I believe in my country's right to exist. I oppose the BDS because it is led by self-righteous advocates whose actual goals are to rid the Middle East of a Jewish state. This underlying and overriding goal of the BDS movement explains how it came to be that a Jewish-Israeli scholar such as myself, who has on occasion been denigrated for his activities on behalf of Jewish-Palestinian accord within Israel, and in particular for advancing the declared second goal of the BDS movement ("Recognising the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality") is subject to boycott by BDS activists. But there is another deceptive element in the BDS campaign that must be highlighted—their use of the South African precedent as a galvanising and evocative frame of reference.

Why I oppose the BDS movement: The South African Analogy

Unwitting supporters of BDS do not realise that the anti-Israel BDS movement is grounded in a fundamental, deeply felt rejection of Israel's right to exist. In this respect, the BDS movement is a continuation of the blind folly of the 1948 Arab League's rejection of the very idea of a Jewish State on the lands of partitioned Palestine. This is where the comparison to South Africa is so misleading. Unlike the anti-Israel BDS's intention to delegitimise the very foundations of Israel as a nation-State, the original anti-apartheid BDS movement did not seek to abolish the state of South Africa. Rather, it sought to rid it of its racist apartheid regime.

In contrast to the South African example, the anti-Israel BDS does not distinguish between Israel's regime (a parliamentary democracy), a particular policy (for example, the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) or a specific political leadership (right-wing, centre or left-wing). To claim that Israel's parliamentary democracy is indistinguishable from South Africa's apartheid regime is, to say the least, intellectually dishonest (Berman 2014: 53). But it is a central element of BDS's propaganda. That is one reason for my

being boycotted: if I am a Jewish Israeli academic, I represent the Israeli State. If I am part of the Israeli State, then I am automatically subjected to boycott and sanctions solely on the basis of my national identity.¹⁹

Such automatic profiling of individuals and institutions on the basis of their national identity was not the mark of the original, South African BDS movement. Quite the contrary. The Anti-Apartheid Movement assumed that the state of South Africa was to remain intact. Apartheid was to end, to be replaced by a majoritarian constitutional democracy (Giliomee 1995). South Africa's regime-type was to be transformed, not its existence eradicated. To compare the system of institutionalised racial discrimination practised in apartheid South Africa to practices in Israel's parliamentary democracy is a clever and dishonest rhetorical ploy that enables the goal of ending the existence of Israel to be masked as a campaign for human rights, similar to the one that brought an end to apartheid.

The Australian BDS experience as an expression of extreme self-righteous moralism

In my initial correspondence with Jake Lynch I offered to meet and discuss his anti-Israel stance. He never replied to that email. Instead, a few weeks later he insinuated in a published commentary that I am not whom I seem or claim to be:

Yes, there are academics in Israel who seek to challenge various aspects of their government's policies, and Professor Dan Avnon, whose request to spend his fellowship at my Centre I declined, may be one of them. His involvement with the Metzilah Centre suggests this aspect of the case may not be as clear-cut as Samuel suggests, which warrants further investigation ... (Lynch 2012, 2013).

What merits further investigation? That I am on the academic board of a research and advocacy centre (Metzilah) that seeks to generate public debate on controversial issues within Israeli society? Is an associate professor in a reputable university implying that policy papers, written by individual scholars associated in a think tank which is dedicated to deliberating diverse ideas, implicate all who are engaged in one of that centre's committees? Should each such scholar be presumed to share the views of every other individual author who participates in the same research centre? Is this how the Peace and Conflict Centre

Dan Avnon

at The University of Sydney is administered? Has Professor Lynch not heard of freedom of thought? Of plurality of ideas? Of think tanks where people actually think, argue – and even disagree?

Instead of simply contacting me and enquiring about my research, opinions or convictions, Professor Lynch's response to criticism through insinuation and innuendo conforms with the pattern of his response to my email and his actions thereafter. I and all Israelis are classified according to a very narrow and specific pattern of associations. We are all probably complicit in some heinous, devious activity. If "further investigated then this Zionist, Professor Avnon, will surely be proven to be ..." whatever is predetermined according to Professor Lynch's categorical preconceptions (Avnon and Benziman 2009: 1-2). This kind of thinking enables Professor Lynch to doubt my integrity, to seek evidence in support of his preconception. Damn the person, hail the preconception.

Commenting on the Book of Luke, the biblical scholar, Mark Allen Powell, comments that "The religious leaders in Luke are characters who 'trust in themselves that they are righteous and despise others'" (Powell 1990: 94). Powell then dwells upon the characterisation of self-righteousness:

Luke characterises the religious leaders as self-righteous in several ways. The narrator describes one of the leaders as a person who seeks "to justify (dikaiosai) himself" (10:29) and refers to their representatives as people who "pretend to be righteous (dikaious)" (20:20). Jesus also describes the leaders as persons who "justify (dikaiontes) themselves before people" (16:15) and he tells a parable in which one of them proclaims his own righteousness (18:10-12). (Powell 1990: 95)

This seems to be a good introduction to the ideal-type behavioural traits of self-righteous moralists. When self-righteous moralism migrates from the sphere of religious discourse to that of politics, then the common translation is to define political opponents as immoral and wrongheaded and the accuser as ethical and pragmatic (Ridge 1969: 150).²⁰

Self-righteous moralism may boomerang when the discrepancy between the morals and the politics are too broad to bridge. The political boomerang happens when the dissonance between the apparent morals and actual politics is evident. I hope that this will be the lot of the academic BDS movement.

BDS and the Dynamics of Self-Righteous Moralism

The fate of the legal case brought by Shurat HaDin against Jake Lynch exemplifies a different aspect of this point. Shurat HaDin are successful in using legal systems as a means to go after the funders of terrorist attacks. This is because they have found the appropriate fit between the ethics and logic of legal spheres of discourse and the international desire to curb terrorism.²¹ I find this line of action commendable and smart. However, in contradistinction, there wasn't a similar fit between Jake Lynch's use of moral discourse in the court of public opinion (the BDS's primary sphere of action), and Shurat HaDin's attempts to transform perceptions of BDS from a galvaniser of public opinion into a legal entity who should be subject to lawfare in judicial courts. It seems to me that Shurat HaDin's decision makers did not realise how wrongheaded was their turn to the Australian legal system, and they did not heed the advice of Australian anti-BDS organisations to discontinue their Australian campaign.

When Shurat HaDin showed up in the Australian public sphere in July 2013, the coalition of anti-BDS advocates seemed to have been successful in marginalising Jake Lynch and his supporters. At this critical juncture, the BDS activists were brought back to the public eye due to the publicity generated by Shurat HaDin. As reported in one newspaper:

But some leaders here [Australia] are understood to be privately fuming about the litigation by the Tel Aviv-based organisation, fearing it is reigniting support for BDS in Australia soon after a broad counter campaign by Jewish leaders had won widespread support.²²

Nitsana Darshan-Leitner, the founder of Shurat HaDin, immediately lashed back, accused the Australian Jewish leadership of "not lifting a finger" in the battle against Jake Lynch's actions. This is a factual error (Wertheim and Ryvchin).²³ She also accused Jewish leaders in Australia of having failed to "stand up for Jewish rights."²⁴ Both accusations fit the mould of self-righteous moralism that I emphasised in my thinking about how good intentions become ill-conceived, at times harmful, actions.

My lessons from being used by BDS protagonists are a mixture of the trivial and the consequential. Beginning from the trivial, I should not apply for fellowships at the last minute; I should run at least quick Google checks prior to contacting scholars with whom I seek to cooperate; I should never assume that personal emails will remain

personal. The consequential lessons are that the level of animosity directed at Israel is way above what I had imagined; that the anti-academic BDS movement is by and large a feel-good movement characterised by self-righteous moralism; that this self-righteous moralism is channelled to an agenda that seeks to undermine the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. And finally, the events I witnessed indicate that when a political actor's actions are fuelled by zealotry, then he or she will find it easier and more self-inflaming to manipulate an image and address its imaginary characteristics than to meet a real, complex person.²⁵

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Endnotes

1. The notion of 'self-righteous moralism' appears in Euben 2002.
2. Mendes and Dyrenfurth (2015: 92-98).
3. My own emails are lightly edited for minor spelling and grammatical mistakes that crop up in email correspondence. I did not change Professor Lynch's wordings.
4. Avnon and Benziman (2009a).
5. The report was published on the first page of *The Australian* on 6 December 2012.
6. See for example, *The Australian*, 8 December 2012 and *The Jerusalem Post*, 8 August 2013, <http://www.jpost.com/International/Sydney-U-against-BDS-but-not-taking-any-action-against-BDS-professor-322496> accessed 30 January 2015.
7. <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/422/071.html>. See critical response to Yamini's assertions in <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/423/718.html>. Both accessed 19 January 2015.
8. See <http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/vilna/during/ponary.asp>; <http://www.msz.gov.pl/resource/65eb5501-876b-4915-a8dd-48ec00882c54>. Both accessed 19 January 2015.
9. Shurat HaDin, a Jewish legal advocacy organisation is dedicated

BDS and the Dynamics of Self-Righteous Moralism

to “bankrupt terror, defend Israel from war crimes, and combat lawfare and the Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions movement.” See <http://israellawcenter.org/about/overview/> accessed 30 January 2015.

10. Statement of Claim - Form 17 - Rule 8.06(1)(a) File Number: NSD2235/2013 File Title: Shurat HaDin - The Israel Law Center & Ors v Jake Lynch. New South Wales Registry- Federal Court of Australia, 20 December 2013.
 11. *Ibid*, sections 34, 41-51.
 12. In the context of this short review, I do not intend to address the many interesting aspects of the Shurat HaDin intervention in this case. This merits a separate essay.
 13. For a comprehensive argument against the political rationale of BDS see Mendes and Dyrenfurth 2015.
- For a diverse (at times eclectic) range of essays critical of the BDS movement see Nelson and Brahm 2014.
14. See more at: <http://www.bdsmovement.net/bdsintro#sthash.iNhQOgyC.dpuf>. Accessed 26 January 2015.
 15. For a philosophical presentation of this line of reasoning, see Martha Nussbaum 2015.
 16. UNRWA was established in order to take care of all “Palestine refugees” of the 1948 war. This implied both Arab/Palestinian and Jewish refugees. In 1952 Israel assumed responsibility for its Jewish refugees and UNRWA assumed responsibility solely for Arab refugees who became known as “Palestinian,” that is: Arab refugees from British mandate Palestine. UNRWA is the sole UN agency dedicated to a single group of refugees, and its mandate is repeatedly renewed (its current mandate will probably be renewed in June 2017) For a review of UNRWA’s history, see Bartholomeusz (2010) and for discussion read Adelman and Barkan (2011).
 17. See example interview with Omar Bargouthi, a prominent BDS founder and activist. http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=5547 accessed 26 January 2015.
 18. Mitchell Cohen has written a scathing review of BDS activists, interpreting their rhetoric and goals as positions “shaped largely by political attitudes and arguments that recall the worst of the twentieth-century left.” In Cohen (2008: 48).
 19. See *The Times* editorial, “Abuse of Science: Hawking’s Boycott

- of Israel is Intellectually and Morally Disreputable.” 10 May 2013. At <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/leaders/article3760693>. ece accessed 30 January 2015.
20. One may note a similar pattern of self-righteous moralism in Ben Dror Yamini’s response to the superficial report about the BDS controversy. Similar to Lynch, he too reacted to an image of a spineless liberal Israeli academic who wanders the world defaming Israel. Hence his “Serves Him Right!” response.
 21. Shurat HaDin’s lawfare tactics are a smart and timely initiative that adds pressure on terrorist organisations and limits their manoeuvring space. See the ruling in their favour in *Sokolow et al v. Palestine Liberation Organisation et al* <http://www.law360.com/cases/4d93a3f0010c44766e000001> (accessed 27 February 2015). It is regretful that Shurat HaDin squandered some of their hard-earned reputation in this ill-conceived Australian venture.
 22. <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/jewish-world-news/.premium-1.597200>
 23. <http://www.timesofisrael.com/australian-jewry-rebukes-sydney-professor-over-israel-boycott/> accessed 19 April 2015.
 24. <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/jewish-world-news/.premium-1.597200>
 25. Stanley Fish comments on the disingenuousness of academics who advocate academic boycotts in withering terms, similar in tenor to what I have in mind: “the idea that an academic becomes some kind of hero by the cost-free act of denying other academics the right to play in the communal sandbox (yes, this is third-grade stuff) is as pathetic as it is laughable. Heroism doesn’t come that cheaply. Better, I think, to wear the “ivory-tower intellectual” label proudly. At least, it’s honest.” In Fish 2013.

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BDS and the Dynamics of Self-Righteous Moralism

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