

BOYCOTTS, DIVESTMENTS and SANCTIONS: A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

What is BDS?

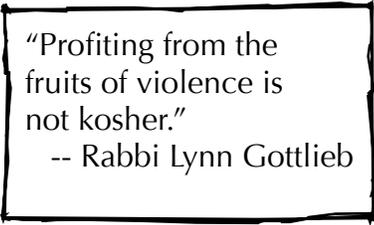
Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions is a grassroots tactic for human rights work that has a proven track record for effectiveness. It has been used in the past to end South African apartheid, to push for civil rights reforms in the United States, and to force California grape producers to honor their workers' desire to improve their standard of living by unionizing.

In July 2005 a broad range of Palestinian civil society organizations issued a call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Against Israel as part of a non-violent campaign to end the Israeli occupation of Gaza and West Bank, including East Jerusalem. You can learn more about the Palestinian call at www.bdsmovement.net.

There is a parallel Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel. You can learn more about it at www.pacbi.org.

What is the position of Jewish Voice for Peace regarding BDS?

The boycott/divestment/sanctions movement (BDS) encompasses a variety of tactics and targets. Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) rejects the assertion that BDS is inherently anti-Semitic, and we encourage discussion both within our own community and outside of it of the growing BDS movement. JVP defends activists' right to use the full range of BDS tactics without being persecuted or demonized.



"Profiting from the fruits of violence is not kosher."
-- Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb

We support divestment from and boycotts of companies that profit from Israel's occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. This includes companies operating in or from occupied Palestinian territory, exploiting Palestinian labor and scarce environmental resources, providing materials or labor for settlements, or producing military or other equipment or materials used to violate human rights or to profit from the Occupation.

What are some examples of JVP's work in this area?

We have supported the efforts of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Methodist Church -- among others -- to divest from companies that profit from the occupation.¹

We have stood behind student-led efforts² to divest from the Israeli occupation: Hampshire College, UC Berkeley,³ UC San Diego, and Evergreen College.

We have stood behind Israeli actors who refused to perform in West Bank settlements. We collected signatures of over 150 American theater and film professionals representing some of the most respected and renowned artists in theater, film and television -- including Pulitzer Prize winners and scores of

¹ Here is an example of our 2008 booklet on the subject, titled [A Moral Choice, Divesting from the Israeli Occupation](#). We continue to support similar efforts today.

² <http://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/campaigns/campus-divestment>

³ See for example, [UC Berkeley divestment vote--it isn't over yet](#)

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recipients of the highest U.S. acting honors, including Tony Awards, Emmy Awards, Grammy Awards, Obie Awards, Drama Desk Awards, and the Oscar.⁴

We are now asking TIAA-CREF--one of the largest financial services in the United States, considered to be one of the largest retirement systems in the world--to stop investing in companies that profit from the Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. We've opened a petition to TIAA-CREF,⁵ and we want you to join us.⁶

The Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions National Committee (BNC) has endorsed our TIAA-CREF campaign and is urging "all groups working on boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaigns in the US, especially on university campuses, to endorse this campaign and join it, whenever possible, to amplify its reach and impact across the US."⁷

In the process of our work, we have learned a few lessons about how our opposition operates: Silencing debate, confusing the facts, taking over student senates, making indiscriminate charges of anti-Semitism, criminalizing anti-occupation activism, implicitly or explicitly condoning widespread hostility against Muslims, Palestinians, and anti-occupation Jews.⁸

We have vigorously defended the right of others to engage in full BDS campaigns. We reject the claim that these are inherently anti-Semitic. We see them as a non-violent response to the daily violence of the Israeli occupation.⁹

Is divestment from the Israeli occupation anti-Semitic?

We reject the notion that these nonviolent tools are inherently anti-Semitic. In the spring of 2010 JVP put together a 40-page document with testimony of the growing Jewish support for divestment from the Israeli occupation.¹⁰

No state is above criticism. No state is above the rule of international law and the scope of human rights

Does divestment from the Israeli occupation single out Israel?

Simply put, singling out Israel is the right thing to do.¹¹

"If a group of students oppose the occupation as unjust, then why should we be threatened if they ask their own organization to divest funds that directly support it? This is not demonization – this is simply ethically responsible investment policy."
--Rabbi Brant Rosen

⁴ <http://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/campaigns/making-history-support-israeli-artists-who-say-no-normalizing-settlements-4>

⁵ [TIAA-CREF: Divest from the Israeli Occupation](http://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/campaigns/tiaa-cref-divest-occupation)

⁶ <http://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/campaigns/tiaa-cref-divest-occupation>

⁷ [TIAA-CREF: Divest from Injustice](#), BNC, Oct 4, 2010

⁸ To learn more about these, go to [Lessons from the UC Berkeley divestment effort](#)

⁹ See for example our defense of Ben Gurion University's Prof. Neve Gordon's publishing of an op-ed in the Los Angeles Times ([Boycott Israel](#), Los Angeles Times, Aug 20, 2009) in support of the BDS movement ([Fire Gordon, without firing him](#)).

¹⁰ [Growing Jewish Support for UC Berkeley Divestment from Israeli Occupation 4-28-10](#)

¹¹ [Singling out Israel is the right thing to do](#), Yaman Salahi. The Berkeley Daily Planet, Apr 8, 2010

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From an American perspective, Israel is already singled out by the United States because it is our single largest recipient of military aid, in the last half century receiving more aid than to all of sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean combined.¹² Every President including President Obama, re-commits to the “special relationship” of Israel and the U.S.

The fact that there are other human rights violators around the world, including the United States, does not mean that no action should be taken against Israel’s human rights violations.

Does divestment from the Israeli occupation harm Palestinians?

Yes it can have an economic impact. Any kind of economic pressure is bound to harm first and foremost the Palestinians, who are already economically vulnerable because of the restrictions that the Israeli occupation imposes on their ability to study, work, and move people or goods. The WhoProfits website¹³ provides ample details about Israel’s

“The most brutal, naked boycott is, of course, the siege on Gaza and the boycott of Hamas.”

--Gideon Levy

exploitation of Palestinian labor, Palestinian natural resources and the captive Palestinian consumer market.

Despite the cost, Palestinians themselves have asked for boycotts, divestments, and sanctions because they see them as an effective tool to express international solidarity and oppose the Israeli occupation. As mentioned earlier, a broad range of Palestinian support economic boycotts, divestments, and sanctions,¹⁴ as well as academic and cultural boycotts of Israel.¹⁵

Does divestment from the Israeli occupation force Israelis to “circle the wagons”?

About 90% of Israeli Jews supported the invasion of Gaza in 2008-2009.¹⁶ The wagons are already circled. Israelis’ continued ability to lead a very normal life, despite the ongoing occupation just a few miles away, means that

Israelis have no incentive to make their government’s behavior change. We cannot underestimate the monetary importance or the symbolic value of economic pressure against the Israeli occupation.

Will BDS tactics really be effective?

The economic effect of the BDS tactic has already been proved. Here are three examples:

¹² [Singling out Israel is the right thing to do](#), Yaman Salahi. The Berkeley Daily Planet, Apr 8, 2010

¹³ [WhoProfits.org](#), a project of the [Coalition of Women for Peace](#), a leading Israeli feminist peace organization.

¹⁴ [www.bdsmovement.net](#)

¹⁵ <http://www.pacbi.org/>

¹⁶ [Israelis United on Gaza War as Censure Rises Abroad](#). New York Times, Jan 12, 2009

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Veolia has signed a principled agreement to sell its shares in the Jerusalem Light Rail, connecting Israel to illegal, Jewish-only settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Veolia's move follows a concerted BDS campaign that has reportedly cost the company almost EUR 5 billion of contracts in the past two years, most prominently a EUR 3 billion tender in Sweden.¹⁷

When Palestinians in the West Bank decided to stop buying goods produced in the Jewish-only settlements, the effect was felt immediately. A spokesman for 300 factory owners in the Mishor Adumim Industrial Zone on the West Bank described the boycott as "an insufferable situation". At least 17 businesses there closed their doors.¹⁸ A few weeks earlier, the Israeli peace group Gush Shalom reported that following a boycott campaign, the cosmetics company Intercosma was being removed from the settlement boycott list since the company departed from the Atarot Industrial Zone on the West Bank.¹⁹

The symbolic value of economic pressure against the Israeli occupation was easy to observe on April 15, 2010, when the Israeli Consul General sat through ten hours of testimonies and deliberations at a UC Berkeley divestment hearing that lasted until 7 am. Divestment is an issue that the Israeli government deeply cares about.

What do Israelis think of boycotts and divestments as a tactic?

Leading Israeli peace and justice groups support these tactics: [Boycott-Supporting the Palestinian Call for BDS from Within Israel](#), [the Coalition of Women for Peace](#), [Gush Shalom](#), [Hithabrut-Tarabut](#), [the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions](#), [New Profile](#), [the Shministim](#), [Yesh Gvul](#). This is all the more remarkable, given the threats to Israeli individual or organizations that take this position.²⁰

Israel engages in a good number of boycotts even beyond the illegal siege of Gaza. Here are some, in the last year alone: Israeli boycotts of Sweden,²¹ the United Kingdom,²² Brazil,²³ Turkey.²⁴ The list goes on.

Does divestment from the Israeli occupation create divisions inside the Jewish community?

We quote from Professor Judith Butler's testimony at the UC Berkeley divestment hearing:

"...there is hardly a Jewish dinner table left in this country--or indeed in Europe and much of Israel--in which there is not enormous disagreement about the status of the occupation, Israeli military aggression and the future of Zionism, binationalism and citizenship in the lands called Israel and Palestine."²⁵

¹⁷ [BDS Victory: TIAA CREF target company Veolia forced to turn over Jerusalem Light Rail](#). JVP, Oct 15, 2010

¹⁸ [Palestinian Economic Boycott Hits Israeli Settlers](#), IPS, May 20, 2010

¹⁹ ["Intercosma" Off Gush Shalom Boycott List](#), Scoop, Apr 29, 2010

²⁰ For example, following an op-ed in the LA Times in favor of boycotts, divestments, and sanctions, the op-ed writer, Ben Gurion University Professor Neve Gordon, was threatened with loss of job. Ben Gurion University President Dr. Rivka Carmi expressed shock at the lecturer's comments and added [the university may no longer be interested in his services](#). And even Israeli Education Minister Education Gideon Sa'ar called the piece "[repugnant and deplorable](#)."

²¹ [Thousands of Israelis petition to boycott Sweden retailer IKEA](#). Haaretz, Aug 23, 2009

²² [Israel boycott of U.K. goods would be toothless, stupid](#) Haaretz, Dec 24, 2009

²³ [Israeli Minister Admits Boycotting Brazilian President](#). Huffington Post, Mar 16, 2010

²⁴ [Halman-Aldubi: Boycott Turkish investments](#). Haaretz, Jun 1, 2010

²⁵ [Growing-Jewish-Support-for-UC-Berkeley-Divestment-from-Israeli-Occupation-4-28-10](#)

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The divisions are already there. A good number of these have been documented in JVP's [Muzzlewatch](#).²⁶

Does divestment from the Israeli occupation create divisions inside the anti-occupation movement?

The efforts to end the Israeli occupation are spearheaded by a good number of groups and grassroots activists holding different ideologies and using different tactics. Some will use economic pressure and others will not. Tactics are not dogmas.²⁷

Our hope is that groups that opt not to choose the divestment route will focus on their own work and not resort to spreading misleading information. So far, we've been mostly disappointed.²⁸

Does divestment make some uncomfortable?

It does, just as the South African divestment campaigns did, before they were broadly embraced. Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote to the Berkeley students pushing for divestment in their campus from the Israeli occupation:

"To those who wrongly accuse you of unfairness or harm done to them by this call for divestment, I suggest, with humility, that the harm suffered from being confronted with opinions that challenge one's own pales in comparison to the harm done by living a life under occupation and daily denial of basic rights and dignity. It is not with rancor that we criticize the Israeli government, but with hope, a hope that a better future can be made for both Israelis and Palestinians, a future in which both the violence of the occupier and the resulting violent resistance of the occupied come to an end, and where one people need not rule over another, engendering suffering, humiliation, and retaliation."²⁹

What does Jewish tradition say on these matters?

Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb answers in one line, "Profiting from the fruits of violence is not kosher."³⁰

Rambam -- a preeminent Jewish philosopher and one of the greatest Torah scholars -- says:

"One may not buy from a thief the goods he has stolen, and to do so is a great transgression because it strengthens the hands of those who violate the law and causes the thief to continue to steal, for if the thief would find no buyer he would not steal, as it says, "He who shares with a thief is his own enemy." (Prov. 2:24)10"³¹

²⁶ <http://www.muzzlewatch.com/>

²⁷ [Israel: Boycott, Divest, Sanction](#), Naomi Klein. The Nation, Jan 7, 2009

²⁸ See for example [A 'constellation of Jewish groups' \(I Street to David Project\) seeks to block any accountability for cruel occupation](#), Sydney Leyy and Yaman Salahi, Apr 10, 2010. See in 2009, [A Blizzard of Lies: The truth about attacks on the Toronto Film Festival protest letter, "The Toronto Declaration: No Celebration of Occupation."](#)

²⁹ [Tutu: Issue is the same in Palestine as it was in South Africa, 'equality'](#), Archbishop Tutu. Apr 11, 2010

³⁰ [Growing Jewish Support for UC-Berkeley Divestment from Israeli Occupation-4-28-10](#)

³¹ Rambam. Laws of Theft, 5:1.

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The American Jewish World Service rightfully interprets Rambam's words this way:

"... as consumers, we bear responsibility for the entire chain of economic activity that brings goods and services to us. Not only are we prohibited from dishonest business practices, we are barred from benefiting from others' unethical business practices."

And further:

"Even if our immediate transaction takes place honestly, we may not participate in a transaction that supports or perpetuates injustice. While purchasing unfairly traded goods is obviously not equivalent to buying stolen property, consumers clearly have an obligation to investigate the origins of the goods they purchase- we are responsible even for the unintended consequences of our business dealings. Were the people who harvested the coffee you drank this morning paid enough to live? Did the people who sewed your clothing work in safe factories?"³²

We can assume that most Jews would agree with these statements. The question is: why single out Israel as the only circumstance where these statements do not hold?

³² [Jewish Perspectives on Trade Justice](#). American Jewish World Service.