1 BDS and Self-Righteous Moralists

Dan Aynon

Dan Aynon tells of his experience with the BDS movement in Australia. His political work for equality and human rights for all citizens of Israel notwithstanding, he became the target of a very public, if personal, boycott by the director of the University of Sydney’s Center for Peace Studies, just because he is an Israeli. This episode demonstrates that the peaceful, social justice declarations of the BDS movement are disingenuous, that BDS targets all Jewish Israelis as part of its program to ultimately end Israel’s existence. Aynon highlights how overreaction to the incident by the anti-BDS legal organization Shurat HaDin actually undermined the opposition to BDS and criticizes the self-righteous moralism that has come to dominate the discourse of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In the course of the years 2012–2014, I was subject to the actions of the Sydney chapter of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) 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 had not previously been singled out for boycott merely because of my being a Jewish-Israeli scholar and surely had never been boycotted by the left-wing edges of political activism, whereas ironically, in Israel, I have occasionally been condemned by academic and nonacademic self-anointed Jewish and patriotic zealots. The novelty of this experience—being boycotted due to my national identity and organizational affiliation—is in the backdrop of my reflections.

I will address two aspects of my BDS experiences. First, I’ll explain how by subjecting me to their propaganda, leaflets, and demonstrations, the BDS activists enabled me to realize that their actual goal is to end Israel’s existence as an independent Jewish state. That’s the political aspect. Second, 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 both pro- and anti-BDS sides of the divide. From this perspective, I’ll raise some initial speculations about an overlooked political
vice and its harmful effects: self-righteous moralism. 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.

The Background

I heard about the faculty exchange fellowship of the Sir Zelman Cowen Universities Fund, which supports exchanges between the University of Sydney and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in 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 Center for Peace and Conflict Studies, Jake Lynch, who, unbeknownst to me, was a zealous supporter of the BDS movement, sent me a surprising response.2

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

Nov. 16, 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 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

Nov. 16, 2012 04:23

Dear Professor Avnon,

Thank you for your email, no apologies necessary.

Indeed, it is I who must apologize to you, for I am bound, by our Center’s policy, to decline your request. My apology to you is on a personal level, for neither I nor the Center 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 Center’s governing Council, and a separate meeting open to the whole university community, when we adopted the policy—along with his response.

Our Center’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, Center for Peace and Conflict Studies

I sent the email late at night (02:02), and 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 what seemed to be personal terms—“on a personal level, for neither I nor the Center have anything against
you”—I naively assumed that this was indeed a personal communication and that a person-to-person response was in order. Hence my reply:

Nov. 16, 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.① 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

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 to gain credit for his ability to boycott Israelis. As for me, I filed this correspondence and went on with my life, for a very short while.

In late November 2012, a week after my nondialogical exchange with 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. From the moment of front-page publication of Kerr’s report on December 6, 2012, Lynch’s decision to publicize 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 proactively promoted 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 and 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. 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. This sentiment seemed prevalent and prevailed until the ill-advised intervention of Shurat HaDin, an international organization that decided to press legal charges against Lynch. The Shurat HaDin interference led to a reversal in the tide of public sentiment. I’ll address this aspect of my experiences shortly.

At this point, I want to present arguments that seem to me sufficient to convince readers that BDS is a dishonest project that may be misleading well-intentioned activists to adopt practices that result in unintended, harmful consequences. Following the presentation of my position regarding the BDS movement, I’ll turn to a directly related and troubling issue: the use of this case by nationalistic Israeli activists as an opportunity to attack my work in promoting democratic civic education in Israel and—from a different quarter—to use my case in an ill-advised manner to delegitimize Lynch and his BDS ilk. The two parts of my report are linked by my characterizing the actions of leading activists on all sides of the BDS debate as self-righteous moralists. This feature is relevant to a principled study of civic activism, beyond the context of 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. I won’t try to summarize these claims; they are readily available to anyone with access to the internet and to university libraries and databases. 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 is as follows: “Ending [Israel’s] occupation and colonization of all Arab lands occupied in June 1967 and dismantling the Wall; recognizing 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.”
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 colonization” and probably think that the 1967 war was a preplanned attempt to colonize areas that in fact were captured as part of a war of self-defense. They hear “dismantling the Wall” (capital W in the original wording) and are moved to action by haunting images of the Berlin Wall and Pink Floyd’s Wall, with their respective bricks and hoped-for downfalls. They read “rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel” and are roused to action by the evocative mention of universal civic rights. Finally, they are summoned to support refugees in terms of UN resolution 194, without knowing when and in what context that resolution was adopted. The language is appealing, using catchy metaphors and playing language games with liberal sentiments through references to colonization, international law, and human rights.

This rhetoric obfuscates realities. Let’s consider the first goal. Fences and walls separating parts of pre-1967 Israel and the West Bank (also referred to as “the occupied territories” and “Judea and Samaria”) were built during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Their purpose was to radically reduce the infiltration of suicide bombers and other forms of terrorism. The purpose was by and large achieved and, on this account, not objectionable. The physical barrier is objectionable, however, when and where it is built on Palestinian land and when it causes illegal, unwarranted, and, at times, outrageous misery to the Palestinian populace. So, there are specific injustices that are due to the wall. But there are also merits to this 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 insensitive 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 truth. As I write these words, the Arab political parties of Israel, which 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 factionalism and came together because they realized that political power in Israel’s democracy will give 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—societies that are just beyond Israel’s boundaries. What about the plights of millions of citizens of Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Sudan? Of women in Saudi Arabia? Of prodemocracy activists in Egypt? I could go on. My point is to put events in proportion: Israeli Arab-Palestinians are fighting an uphill, but 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 anyone would 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 that already 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. This is 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 is imperfect. But that is not uncommon. Democracy is a regime type that actually assumes human and social imperfection and enables processes that endeavor to improve social, economic, and political qualities of life. Like other postcolonial democracies, Israel debates 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 for 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 retreats 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?

This question has its answer in the BDS movement’s third goal. While blatantly partisan, anti-Israel, 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 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 that established two states, Jewish and Arab, in the territory known as Palestine. Resolution 194—“the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties”—was adopted in December 1948. It was enacted after a ceasefire had been declared between the newly established Jewish State and the various Arab invaders. Resolution 194 did not foresee that the temporary 1949 lines of armistice, later known as the “pre-1967 boundaries,” would for all intents and purposes delineate the boundaries of the Jewish State. Regrettably, 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 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 181) or established a smaller temporary state in 1949 (after 194), and from that position, they 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). It is now the year 2017. To call in the year 2017 for the return of all refugees and their descendants to the Jewish State of Israel on the basis of resolution 194, while disregarding all that has transpired since December 1948, is not merely a protest against specific policies. It exposes the movement’s actual purpose: the destruction of Israel by the “return” of millions of Palestinians. This is tantamount to advocating the dismantling of Sydney—including the grounds on which Lynch teaches “peace and conflict studies”—and returning these lands to their precolonization 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 the existence of the Jewish State. That is why Lynch and his ilk can boycott 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!”

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 Galilee’s highest mountains. The giver was the ruler of the hour, Ottoman Pasha Ibrahim. Beck established an agricultural settlement that was inhabited by over a hundred
members of his Hasidic community. In 1839, the ruler was deposed, and a new ruler from a different Ottoman faction ascended to power in Palestine. The shift in power emboldened 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 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 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 (“Recognizing 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 a South African precedent as a galvanizing frame of reference.

Why I Oppose the BDS Movement:
The South African Analogy

Unwitting supporters of BDS do not realize 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 anti-Israel BDS’s intention to delegitimize 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 merely to rid it of its racist apartheid regime.

In contrast to that example, anti-Israel BDS does not distinguish between Israel’s regime (a parliamentary democracy), a particular policy (for example, the two-state solution), or a specific political leadership (right-wing, center, 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. 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 subject to boycotts and sanctions solely on the basis of my national identity.11

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 antiapartheid movement assumed that the state of South Africa was to remain intact. Apartheid was to end, to be replaced by
a majoritarian constitutional democracy. South Africa's regime type was to be transformed, not its existence eradicated. To compare the system of institutionalized racial discrimination practiced in South Africa under apartheid to practices in Israel's parliamentary democracy is, therefore, 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.

My Australian BDS Experience as an Expression of Extreme Self-Righteous Morality

In my initial correspondence with Lynch, I offered to meet and discuss his anti-Israel stance. He never replied. Instead, a few weeks later, he insinuated in a published commentary that I am not who 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 Aylon, whose request to spend his fellowship at my Center I declined, may be one of them. His involvement with the Metzilah Center suggests this aspect of the case may not be as clear-cut as [Sigal Samuel] suggests, which warrants further investigation."¹²

What warrants further investigation? That I am on the academic board of a research and advocacy center (Metzilah) that seeks to generate public debate on controversial issues within Israeli society? Is Lynch implying that policy papers, written by individual scholars associated with a think tank dedicated to deliberating diverse ideas, implicate all who are engaged in that center's committees? Should each such scholar be presumed to share the views of every other individual author who participates in the same research center? Is this how the Center for Peace and Conflict at the University of Sydney is administered? Has 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 inquiring about my research, opinions, or convictions, Lynch responded to criticism through insinuation and innuendo, conforming 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, this Zionist, Professor Aylon, will surely be proven to be" whatever is predetermined according to Lynch's categorical preconceptions. This kind of thinking enables Lynch to doubt my integrity and seek evidence in support of his preconception. Damn the person, hail the preconception.

Commenting on the Book of Luke, Bible scholar Mark Allen Powell comments, "The religious leaders in Luke are characters who 'trust in themselves that they are righteous and despise others,'" and then dwells on the characterization of self-righteousness: "Luke characterizes the religious leaders as self-righteous in several ways. The narrator describes one of the leaders as a person who seeks
‘to justify (dikaioi) himself’ (10:29) and refers to their representatives as people who ‘pretend to be righteous (dikaioi)’ (20:20). Jesus also describes the leaders as persons who ‘justify (dikaioi) themselves before people’ (16:15) and he tells a parable in which one of them proclaims his own righteousness (18:10–12)." 13

This seems to be a good introduction to the ideal-type behavioral traits of self-righteous moralists. Self-righteousness blinds well-meaning protagonists to facts, to complexity, and to the exercise of morals that in ordinary conduct guide their personal actions. The appearance of zealotry in pursuit of lofty moral goals overshadows the actual—judicious and sensitive—encounter with reality. When self-righteous moralism migrates from the sphere of religious discourse to that of politics, then a common act is to define political opponents as immoral and wrongheaded and the accuser as ethical and pragmatic.

Self-righteous moralism is not limited to Lynch and his supporters, of course. 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 Yemini, tore into my Israeli public persona. In that hatchet job, he revealed the fact that I was subject to a dose of BDS activism: "Professor Dan Aylon 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 Aylon 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." 14

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 settled in Ottoman Palestine in 1831), my father’s Lithuanian Jewish family was liquidated by the Nazis in the 1941–1944 Ponary forest massacres. 15 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 nation-states, 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 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 mold.16 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 nonreligious, 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 or radical, or perhaps both, then I carry this charge too as a badge of honor.

So much for my being castigated by nationalistic ultra-patriots in Israel. The public chain of events generated by the ongoing attacks and counterattacks between pro-BDS activists and the many who rallied against them drew the attention of an additional actor. Shurat HaDin, an Israeli organization that specializes in “lawfare” against anti-Israel terrorist organizations,17 decided to use my incident as an opportunity to stem the rise of BDS activism in Australia and elsewhere. In July 2013, they filed a complaint against Lynch with the Australian Human Rights Commission, under section 46P of the Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986 (AHRC), alleging unlawful discrimination under the Racial Discrimination Act 1975. The commission did not accept the complaint. In December 2013, Shurat HaDin moved up the legal ladder and filed a statement of claim against Lynch in the Australian federal court.18

The statement of claim included “The Avnon Acts,” a series of discriminatory practices to which Professor Dan Avnon had been subjected. Shurat HaDin never contacted me, never consulted with me, nor asked for my permission or advice on this matter, yet decided to file its lawsuit on behalf of apparent victims of BDS activities, using my case as the linchpin. 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 article reference to the Shurat HaDin case due to their exemplifying what I had already noted when observing 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 of their judgment and consequent actions. 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 own 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.19
The legal case brought by Shurat HaDin against Lynch exemplifies poor judgments that ensue from being guided by self-righteous moralism rather than by clear-headed and well-founded analysis and pursuant political strategies. Shurat HaDin is 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.20 I find this line of action commendable and smart. However, there was not a similar fit between Lynch’s use of moral discourse in the court of public opinion (BDS’s primary sphere of action) and Shurat HaDin’s attempts to transform perceptions of BDS from a galvanizer of public opinion into a legal entity that should be subject to judicial lawfare. It seems to me that Shurat HaDin did not realize how wrongheaded was their turn to the Australian legal system, and they did not heed the advice of Australian anti-BDS organizations 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 marginalizing Lynch and his supporters. At this critical juncture, 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 organization, fearing it is reigniting support for BDS in Australia soon after a broad counter campaign by Jewish leaders had won widespread support.”21

Nitsana Darshan-Leitner, the founder of Shurat HaDin, immediately lashed back, accusing the Australian Jewish leadership of “not lifting a finger” in the battle against Lynch’s actions.22 This is a factual error.23 She also accused Jewish leaders in Australia of having failed to “stand up for Jewish rights.”24 Jewish leadership had in fact conducted a successful campaign against the Australian BDS until the intervention by her organization, and in turning against them, Darshan-Leitner’s accusations fit the mold of self-righteous moralism that I emphasized 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 with 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; and I should never assume that personal emails will remain personal. The consequential lessons are: the level of animosity directed at Israel is way above what I had imagined; the antiacademic BDS movement is by and large a feel-good movement characterized by self-righteous moralism; and this self-righteous moralism is channeled to an agenda that seeks to undermine the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. The events I witnessed indicate that when a political actor’s actions are fueled by zealotry, 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, 26
DAN AVNON is an Associate Professor at the Hebrew University's Department of Political Science. In 2001, he founded the university's Gilo Center for Citizenship, Democracy & Civic Education, which he headed until 2007.

Notes


3. My own emails are lightly edited for minor mistakes that crop up in email. I did not change Professor Lynch's wordings.


6. For a comprehensive argument against the political rationale of BDS, see Mendes and Dyrenfurth, Boycotting Israel Is Wrong. For a diverse (at times, eclectic) range of essays critical of the BDS movement, see Gary Nelson and Gabriel Noah Brahm, eds., The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel (New York: MLA Members for Scholars' Rights, 2014).


8. For a philosophical presentation of this line of reasoning, see Martha Nussbaum, "Against Academic Boycotts," in Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel, eds. Nelson and Brahm, 39–48.

9. UNRWA was established to take care of all “Palestine refugees” of the 1948 war. This implied both Arab 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-mandated Palestine. UNRWA is the sole UN agency dedicated to a single group of refugees, and its mandate has been repeatedly renewed for decades.

10. See, for example, the interview with Omar Barghouti, prominent BDS founder and activist; "Should People Boycott Israel," The Real News (August 29, 2010), http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=318&Itemid=74&jumival=5547.


16. For examples, see Avnon and Benziman, “Effective Plurality Despite Categorical Rigidity,” and Dan Avnon, ed., Civic Education in Israel (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2013, in Hebrew).


19. The many interesting aspects of the Shurat HaDin intervention in this case merit a separate essay.

20. Shurat HaDin’s lawfare tactics are a smart and timely initiative that adds pressure on terrorist organizations and limits their maneuvering space. See the ruling in their favor in Sokolow et al. v. Palestine Liberation Organization et al., http://www.law360.com/cases/409343500144766000001 (accessed October 31, 2017). It is regretful that Shurat HaDin squandered some of their hard-earned reputation in this ill-conceived Australian venture.


23. See Peter Wertheim and Alex Rychin, The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Campaign against Israel (Sydney: The Executive Council of Australian Jewry, undated).


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.” Stanley Fish, “Academic Freedom against Itself: Boycotting Israeli Universities,” The New York Times (October 28, 2013), http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/28/academic-freedom-against-itself-boycotting-israeli-universities/?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss.

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