

# BDS, Blowhards, Denunciations, and Swear Words

## **BDS, Blowhards, Denunciations, and Swear Words**

**Kenneth Stern**, *The Conflict over the Conflict* (Toronto: New Jewish Press, 2020).

**Mira Sucharov**. *Borders and Belonging: A Memoir* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

Review by Peter Eisenstadt

Twice in recent years I have attended annual conventions of the American History Association (AHA). And twice I have voted against resolutions that condemned Israeli actions, but weren't quite BDS resolutions. (That is, they condemned Israeli actions in Gaza and elsewhere, but did not call for boycotting Israeli academic institutions.) And twice I have been unsure if I made the right decision. I agreed with one commentator who said that while he voted against the resolutions, he found himself in much more agreement with its supporters than with its detractors, most of whom thought the best way to argue against BDS was to make the case that, after all, the Occupation and the Gaza Wars weren't "that bad" and things were looking up for the Palestinians.

My friends at the meeting were split between the pro and contra sides. I thought the resolutions were gratuitous, but certainly agreed that most of the events mentioned in the resolutions were eminently worthy of condemnation. But I wondered why other countries with miserable human rights records were not singled out in this or other AHA resolutions. However, usually I find myself on the other side of these "holding Israel to a double standard" arguments and wondered about my consistency. I also felt that, for the most part, professional organizations like the AHA should refrain from taking positions on politically controversial issues, on which AHA members are perfectly capable of speaking for themselves.

On the other hand, there are exceptions to this principle, times when political commitment by professional historians is obligatory, and silence is a form of collaboration. Perhaps this was one of those times. Certainly I have put my name to countless petitions condemning Israeli actions over the years. Why not two more? I am tired of resolutions that like a butcher's knife cleaving complex issues into which-side-are-you-on dichotomies. But then again, people at some point have to unambiguously take sides. It is this back and forth scissoring of incompatible moral imperatives is at the heart of Ken Stern's insightful and timely book, *The Conflict over the Conflict*.

Few people are as knowledgeable, or have been as central, to the BDS debate as Kenneth S. Stern. An attorney, he came to prominence defending Dennis Banks of the American Indian Movement. From 1989 to 2014 he was the director of antisemitism research, extremism, and hate studies for the American Jewish

Committee, and has helped shape hate studies as an academic discipline. He was a drafter of the much-discussed definition of antisemitism developed by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) in 2004. Anyone interested in the history of the BDS controversy (which is presumably everyone reading this) would benefit from reading Stern's book. There is no better road map to the twists and turns of the debate in recent years, in a book that is in equal parts a history and a memoir. I learned much, such as about the connection between the 2001 Durban conference (the UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance) and the rise of BDS, and his account of the background to the EUMC definition.

Stern is throughout an eminently fair-minded navigator of the conflict. He is one of those pesky First Amendment near-absolutists who will convince you that, however despicable the views being aired (with the inevitable Holocaust-denier exception), people should be allowed to speak in public, and those with opposing views have the right to make their opposition clear, but not to the point of granting them a heckler's veto. Stern is opposed to BDS as a political strategy, but he is equally opposed to those who deny BDS proponents the right to speak in public. He is outraged by the persistence of antisemitism, and equally outraged by false cries of antisemitism used to silence legitimate critics of Israeli policies.

This plague-on-both-your-houses approach often leaves one warily eying the extremes from some middle vantage point, and Stern is a supporter of organizations such as Alliance for Academic Freedom (AAF), the Third Narrative, and Ameinu that do just that, and which generally are champions of nuance, complexity, and dialogue. But in my experience they are basically anti-BDS organizations, and real dialogue between these organizations and those that support BDS, such as Jewish Voice for Peace or Students for Justice in Palestine, has been largely impossible.

One problem with these sorts of debates is that both sides accuse the other of being intolerant of free speech. The reality is that the BDS forces control a few academic departments and organizations, and the anti-BDS side more or less controls everything else, including academic administrations, and has the ears of politicians and legislatures.

BDS, as Stern documents, has been a failure. After a brief spurt in the years 2011–2013, very few academic organizations have passed BDS resolutions. Colleges have not banned Israeli scholars, divested from Israeli companies, or from American defense contractors that do business with Israel. The few episodes of hostility towards Jewish students on campus by pro-Palestinian students have been megaphoned into intimations of a coming pogrom which, as Stern points out, never seems to arrive.

Meanwhile, anti-BDS has been a great success. The BDS movement had been magnified into Public Enemy Number One and a Half by Israel and mainstream Jewish organizations in the United States, just behind Iran. BDS supporters have sometimes been banned from entering Israel. The German government, the US State Department, and a number of state governments have passed resolutions and laws that make support of BDS equivalent to antisemitism, and

thus a prosecutable hate crime. This pattern is all-too common in American history, as fairly marginal left-wing groups become the basis of mainstream obsessions, from the Red Scare a century ago, anti-Communism in the 1950s, through the current "socialism" and Black Lives Matter scares.

Ken Stern is now apologetic about the role he played in formulating the EUMC definition of antisemitism in 2004, and he has a fascinating account of its creation. The most controversial part of the definition concerned Israel, which included "denying Jewish people the right to self-determination," "applying double standards" to Israel's actions, or claiming that the "existence of Israel is a racist endeavor." He argues these were intended as aids to "data collection," that is, researchers might find antisemitism to lurk behind such accusations (or not.) Instead, the definition, Stern argues, has been "weaponized" and used by organizations and some governments to make these claims prime facie evidence of antisemitism and, by so doing, has contributed to the general climate of intolerance. I have no doubt that Stern's account is accurate, but I think that such a transition was also entirely predictable. If you give witch hunters a manual for the discovery of witchcraft they will find witches.

Stern writes that "the main point of this book is that the issue of Israel and Palestine is incredibly complex." Sure. But we need to be careful not to use "complexity" as an excuse for inaction or countering every suggestion for change to the status quo by replying "you know, things are really complicated." I am leery of what might be called "Israel-Palestine exceptionalism." There are lots of problems that are incredibly complex. As a historian, if you are not writing about something that is incredibly complex, you are wasting your talents. What distinguishes the Israel-Palestine conflict from other "incredibly complex" problems such as, let us say, racism in America, is that it seems fossilized in amber. There has been no positive movement in the quarter-century since the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. Israeli politics has lurched sharply and perhaps irreversibly rightwards, the Occupation has become ever more adamant and its supporters ever more intransigent, while the Palestinians, weak and divided, have become ever more politically enfeebled.

We need to remember that BDS is a tactic, not a solution. The real division is between those who sincerely wish to end the Occupation, and those who do not. Among those in the former camp there are those who think BDS is a useful tool, and those who think it is not. And though, of course, there are countless ideas, many mutually inconsistent, on how to end the Occupation, this is what we have to debate. When BDS or not-BDS becomes the main issue, the Occupation itself is relegated to second-order status.

Behind most "incredibly complex" problems lurks a simple truth, and the simple truth behind the Israel-Palestine problem is that Israelis are very afraid to give up the control they currently exert over the Palestinian population in the territories, and the Palestinians are very afraid that their aspirations for self-determination will be negotiated away in any deal with Israel. The rest, as Hillel said is commentary. I think what Hillel meant was that while there are incredibly complex problems, there is no such thing as an incredibly complex solution, because that is not a solution at

all. As for worries about antisemitism among BDS supporters, my prescription is don't be an anti-Semite or tolerate it in others, and call it out when you see it, even, and perhaps especially, from people who otherwise agree with you. And likewise for anti-Palestinianism.

The first chapters of Ken Stern's *The Conflict Over the Conflict* stress that the *homo politicus*, and *a fortiori* the Israel/Palestinian *homo politicus*, is usually not a paragon of deliberative rationality. We come to any political debate trailing the burden of our accumulated biases and the ties with the institutions and persons that have made us what we are. And if these are problems, they are also potential sources of strength. The first step towards solving any political problem is to really care about it, and make it a priority. A book that demonstrates this, movingly, is Mira Sucharov's well-written account of her farewell to liberal Zionism, *Borders and Belonging: A Memoir*. It is strongly recommended. Mira is a friend. We met while posting comments on the listserv of the Alliance for Academic Freedom. We both left, I think, for similar reasons; finding the ideological borders of its "third-wayism" too confining.

But Mira's book is much more than another what-is-to-be-done polemic. It is an account of her life, and an account of how for most North American Jews—Mira is a proud Canadian—the debate about Israel is not about a country thousands of miles away, but is about us. It is something deeply personal, built from memories of family seders, Hebrew school, and Jewish summer camps, trips to and extended periods spent in Israel; of parents, friends, teachers, and lovers. Her memoir is an account of the intellectual and emotional resonances that shaped her efforts to make sense of her Jewishness, and how her political evolution led her to question some of her assumptions, and her leftward shifts led to the fraying and breaking of some old ties. Her politics has led to ostracism from segments of the organized Canadian Jewish community. She describes the pain it has caused and her resoluteness in her current political beliefs, along with the reluctance to define herself, or current and erstwhile friends, through politics alone. Many leftist North American Jews have gone through a similar process of painful maturation, trying to be both a lover of Zion and an anathemizer of Israel's current realities. Mira writes for many of us.

It is one of the signal strengths of both of these books that they do not value intellect over emotions when it comes to the Israel-Palestine question. It is a problem where, with apologies to Yeats, both the best and worst are full of passionate intensity. This will not change. And though the books have somewhat differing political perspectives, they both make the case that we need to use our intellects to discipline our emotions, our emotions to focus our intellects, and to use both to guide our actions. And to return to Hillel, for all the complexity of the situation, all the *pilpul* of the competing narratives, the accumulated pain and heartbreak, the false dawns and missed opportunities, the solution can be summarized, succinctly: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor." The rest is commentary.

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