Partners for Progressive Israel mourns the loss of our board member, Prof. Todd Gitlin, who passed away on February 5th. Todd is remembered in popular culture as a president of the SDS, Students for a Democratic Society, in the 1960s and for his activism against the Vietnam War, against Apartheid in South Africa, and for civil rights in the United States. But Todd also maintained a powerful connection to his Jewish identity and to Israel, and this was reflected in his progressive activism on behalf of peace and equality for both Israelis and Palestinians.

In 1971, for example, many years before talk of Palestinian statehood was considered legitimate by the mainstream, Todd was one of a select group of signers of a public statement entitled “The Liberation of Palestine and Israel.” “Israel cannot make a just peace with the governments of Jordan or Egypt or Syria …, while she ignores the Palestinians,” the statement read. And, conversely, “the Palestinians cannot simply treat Israel as an extension of Western imperialism, for … an Israeli people exists and they will not disappear, except through genocide.” Both peoples, the letter declared, are entitled to “survival and full liberation.”

Based on this commitment to the liberation of all peoples, Todd vehemently opposed “the illegal Israeli occupation of the West Bank,” as he recently wrote, and the concomitant “violent oppression of Palestinians who live there,” which he described as “an offense to humanity.”

Understanding that Israel’s massive settlement project in the Occupied Territories was designed to cement and eternalize that occupation, in 2016 he spearheaded “A Call for an Economic Boycott and Political Nonrecognition of the Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Territories,” which demanded that the American government “exclude settlements from trade benefits accorded to Israeli enterprises” as well as deny IRS tax exemptions to American nonprofits that sent funds to Israel’s commercial and residential entities in the West Bank. The aim, wrote fellow board member, David Abraham, a co-author of the Call, was to “revive the visibility and importance of the Green Line and distinguish between a legitimate Israel and an illegitimate Occupation.”

When Ben & Jerry’s announced last year that they would be terminating their business in the Occupied Territories, therefore, Todd saw it as a validation of his path, and shared with David Abraham that learning of this development had brought “tears to my eyes.”
But Todd rejected the idea that occupation and settlements delegitimized all of Israel, and he therefore found no positive value in the BDS movement, which, he argued, “knows only one set of wrongs, not another. It proclaims that there is but one story to be told of the Middle Eastern tragedy” and therefore cannot contribute to a just settlement of an essentially ethnic conflict. Nonetheless, because he steered clear of doctrinaire politics, Todd was also willing to work with BDS advocates, when possible, in the interest of bringing an unjust occupation to an end.

While Partners for Progressive Israel is part of the World Zionist movement, Todd personally refrained from using the word “Zionist” to describe himself – not because he rejected Israel’s existence, but because he felt the term to be an anachronism: After all, he said, the aim of political Zionism, statehood, had already been achieved.

Overall, however, Todd shared the approach of Partners for Progressive Israel and decided to join our board in 2015, stepping down only recently in the wake of family illness. He was glad to moderate our 2019 webinar that discussed the BDS movement as well as the exaggerated reaction to it, and he was a willing co-signer of our 2020 letter to our friends in Meretz, encouraging them to expand the level of Jewish-Arab political partnership in the party, as befits a shared democratic society.

“He appreciated what Partners stood for,” noted fellow board member Peter Eisenstadt: “An end to the occupation, the promotion of collaboration between Israeli Jews and Palestinians, ... and the continuing commitment to political activism.” Likewise, Peter wrote, Todd also “appreciated what Partners did not stand for: the dubious satisfactions of dogmatism and the Manichaeism of contending absolutes.”

We salute the life and activism of Todd Gitlin. Y’hi zichro Baruch. May his memory serve as a blessing.