

Avrum Burg on BDS

February 3, 2014 Ha'aretz

Avrum Burg was chair of the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization, a member of Knesset, chair of the Knesset, and for a brief moment even served as interim Prime Minister of the S

tate of Israel. Here are his reflections on the movement for Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel till it ends the Occupation of the West Bank, reprinted from Ha'aretz, Israel's most respected newspaper.

What's Wrong with BDS by Avrum Burg

Talk of sanctions has been filling the air lately. Israelis, as always, are certain that the whole world is against us (psycho-national nonsense that will be more broadly discussed here in the future), and that all the world's overt and covert conspiracies are focused solely on us – out of hatred and anti-Semitism, of course.

Few notice the wonderful paradox whereby official Israel, together with mobilized world Jewry, fights the scourge of sanctions by whining and screaming anti-Semitism, Holocaust and Jew-hatred in chorus. Yet in the very same breath these exact same people utilize any possible tool to advance and intensify the sanctions against Iran, as they did against Hamas until recently. And with useful diplomatic hypocrisy they make every effort not to hurt Syria's Bashar Assad too much, or Egypt, or another few corrupt targets of Israel's foreign policy.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement is gaining momentum and is approaching the turning point (rather slowly, it must be said) in which the civic action from below will meet the official policies of governments and parliaments from above, and sanctions against Israel will become a fait accompli. Israel's finance minister is troubled by the economic consequences, while the American secretary of state is trying to protect us from international isolation. Research institutions are already mapping out their boycotts and sanctions while offering avenues for formulating appropriate Israeli policies. The media are also making their serious or frenzied contributions. Among all this talk, what is conspicuously missing is a real discussion of the ethical meaning of sanctions and their alternatives.

Personally I'm a man of dialogue and believe that a boycott – any boycott – is not a legitimate tool. When my prime minister leaves the room as the Iranian president is speaking, I can't decide whether he's an idiot or just being childish, but what's clear is that he doesn't represent me at all. I believe in peace and I have no doubt that proper

(if pointed) dialogue with the Palestinians will in the end bring two achievements: peace, and the end to the boycotts, ostracism and isolation under discussion. It's the same with the Iranians, and even with Danny Danon.

But those who don't want peace, or who want it but don't trust the partner, or who want and trust but don't have the public courage to stand up to the enemies of peace among us, must ask themselves different questions altogether. It's clear that there's a connection between the diplomatic reality and its economic manifestations. It's permissible – despite the evil and folly of that approach – to decide that it's worth holding the occupied territories, if only because at this point the price of international isolation or the harm done to the pockets of Mr. and Mrs. Israeli is not so terrible. After all, in the end, national policy is a system of constantly balancing risks and rewards, and for now – they say – the risks are tolerable.

But everyone else – the political impotents or the merely indifferent – needs a different approach. Put yourselves for a minute in the Palestinians' place and try to understand what Israel "allows them" and consider what you would do in their position. A violent Palestinian rebellion? No way! Totally out of the question, not least because it will be put down by a much more violent force. (It's an undeniable fact that more innocent Palestinians have been killed by Israel than innocent Israelis killed by Palestinians). A diplomatic agreement? You've made Naftali Bennett's rear end and Benjamin Netanyahu's lost senses laugh. So then what? Nothing? Should they just say thank you and shut up? Would we remain silent and capitulate unconditionally if we were in their place?

Suddenly it turns out that the boycott movement is not just an annoying effort to hit Israelis in the pocket, but a bold and innovative attempt to achieve real diplomatic gains. And in the areas in which I firmly believe require dialogue and solutions: an end to the occupation, the destruction of the separation barrier, recognition of the rights and equality of Israel's Palestinian citizens, and a solution to the refugee problem. It's a local and international expression of a totally different type of Palestinian struggle, something new and not so familiar to us – nonviolent resistance. Is that also forbidden?

What emerges from all this is that of all the alternatives being suggested – as if anyone is asking us or has to care what we think – boycotts and sanctions are actually the most kosher. Silencing and repression are bad, and violence is worse. Compared to either method, nonviolent resistance and an unarmed popular uprising don't sound so bad. The truth is that not all of their people are behind this (just like not all of our people support us), but the direction being outlined is clear, convincing and threatening. Deep down I'm convinced that the tough State of Israel has a response to any expression of force it may face. But it will remain helpless when confronted by a

civil rebellion that moves the discourse from who's stronger/tougher/more resilient to a discourse on rights and values. For this we have no answer.

What will the politicians and soldiers of the racist separation do on Hebron's Shuhada Street, which is closed to Palestinians, if a thousand kids come with their bikes, soccer balls and cameras and ask to play on the street in front of their homes – a basic right of any normal child on any street in the world? What will be the response of the Sensible One if the parents of those children, along with hundreds or thousands of other people (me and my family among them) come to the wall of the Palestinian ghetto (known euphemistically as the separation barrier) and hold a vigil there before the international media, under clouds of tear gas, until it comes down?

The answer is clear. On the very day that nonviolence becomes Palestine's official policy, Israel's violent occupation policy is over. The current hysteria over boycotts and sanctions testifies to this.