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How History Will Judge Boycotters of the Theater in Ariel

By Leonard Fein

What shall we make of the recent refusal by dozens of Israeli actors and artists to perform in the newly built cultural center in Ariel, a city of 17,000 deep in the West Bank? By now, their voices have been augmented by those of some 150 American peers, including Broadway producer Harold Prince, performers Eve Ensler, Mandy Patinkin and Theo Bikel, and playwrights Tony Kushner and Stephen Sondheim. A similar number of Israeli academics and authors, including Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua and David Grossman, also publicly back the boycott.

Boycotts are not all the same; they come in different sizes and styles, from grassroots to government-backed, personal and public, formal and informal. Jews — and Israel — have been both the executors and the targets of many of these actions. Best-known, until recently, has been the boycott of Israel by the Arab states, a boycott that predates Israeli statehood and includes not only a rejection of any commerce with Israel but also a secondary boycott covering firms anywhere that do business with Israel. For some of the Arab countries, the primary form of that boycott remains in place.

At the more personal extreme, there was my father's boycott of all things German — including even the words "Made in Germany" that were carved into the recorder I once bought, words he fastidiously whittled out.

As early as 1933 there was a fierce dispute among American Jews about the wisdom of a boycott of Hitler's Germany, with the Jewish Labor Committee, the American Jewish Congress,

the Jewish War Veterans, B'nai Brith and a handful of others on the pro-boycott side, and pretty much everyone else on the other. (Soon after, the entire nation was caught up in a debate on whether America should boycott the 1936 Berlin Olympics.)

Today, of course, there are several new and controversial boycotts aimed at Israel. There is the growing global BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions) movement; there is an effort to boycott items produced in Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and now there is the artists' boycott of the cultural center in Ariel. It is only the last of these that concerns me here; I am not in search of a universal response to all kinds of boycotts, nor do I believe there is one size that fits all.

Ariel is plainly the most controversial of the settlements that might be retained by Israel (in return for an equivalent amount of land) if a peace agreement is ever reached. It is halfway between Tel Aviv and the Jordan River, and it effectively blocks the north-south contiguity of a Palestinian state. The notion of a wall around Ariel, and around the highway that leads from Ariel to the Green Line, 18 kilometers away, is impossible to process — unless, of course, you are determined that Israel maintain control of all the West Bank, or you think that the Palestinians will settle for a state composed of Bantustans. Such a state would perpetuate effective Israeli control of the West Bank, hence be merely a caricature of a state.

To ask of an artist who clearly sees that reality to contribute to the notion that Ariel is, as it so loudly proclaims, just another Israeli city, is to ask that she abandons conscience. Withholding consent is an elementary form of protest, and in this case it comes to remind people that Ariel is not an instance of pioneering Zionism but of Israeli colonization. (In fact, the boycotters' refusal applies to *all* settlements beyond the Green Line.) Neither the residents of Ariel nor the relevant government bodies regard Ariel as a temporary outpost. Those who planned and built it know quite precisely why it was built where it was built. Its existence is clearly a political statement.

That is why the reaction to the artists' boycott has been quick, harsh and largely disingenuous, from Prime Minister Netanyahu on down. Government ministers and Knesset members condemn the politicization of culture, some proposing a counter-boycott of any artist who refuses to perform in Ariel. (Theater companies in Israel are publicly funded; the major companies have all indicated that they will perform wherever they are invited.)

The debate is ugly. But the situation that gives rise to it is infinitely uglier, involving, as it does, the theft of land, Israel's credibility as a pursuer of peace and as advocate of a two-state solution. It is not, after all, the boycott of a cultural center that threatens to delegitimize Israel. It is the settlement project itself.

Artistic history offers rich precedent: The great cellist Pablo Casals was widely admired for his steadfast refusal to go home to Catalonia so long as Spain was under fascist rule. He refused to perform in any country that recognized the Franco dictatorship (until accepting President Kennedy's invitation to perform at the White House in 1961). Or think of the Italian patriot Arturo Toscanini, arguably the greatest conductor of all time. While Mussolini ruled as Italy's dictator, from 1922 to 1943, the Maestro famously refused to perform in his native country. He denounced the Nazis' treatment of Jewish musicians; he refused to conduct at Austria's Salzburg Festival because Jewish conductor Bruno Walter's performances there weren't broadcast in Germany. (And in the late 1930s he conducted at a festival in Lucerne with an orchestra entirely composed of musicians who had fled German persecution.)

Casals and Toscanini were on the right side of history. So are those who have added their names in support of the Ariel boycott.