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How Big a Tent?

By Leonard Fein

Drawing boundaries, whether for congressional districts after the decennial census, for nations (Israel/Palestine, for example) or to determine who belongs “within the tent” of Jewish life, is a complicated and often nasty business. At the moment, considerable Jewish energy is being invested on all sides of this last, the tent question. So, for example, a Knesset committee, apparently convinced that its span of authority extends to American Jewish organizations, has convened a hearing on whether J Street has the right to call itself “pro-Israel.” Such clumsy intrusion is outrageous, but, given the quality of Knesset discourse, it is no great surprise. And here at home, the J Street debate — often ugly and riddled with misinformation and misunderstanding — has become a virtual staple of communal life.

I am at a loss to comprehend the continuing assaults on J Street, which seem to me remarkably myopic. The fact that some 170,000 people have chosen to identify with an organization that advertises itself as “pro-peace, pro-Israel” should be a cause for celebration, not for self-destructive opprobrium. One need not agree with J Street’s positions on the range of issues it addresses in order to greet its presence in our community with enthusiasm — or, at the least, with respectful courtesy.

An organization called Jewish Voice for Peace presents a much more complicated problem. It, too, as its name indicates, is “pro-peace.” But there it rests its case. Being “pro-Israel” per se, whatever that may be understood to mean, is not an element of its stated agenda. As do very many others, both in Israel and throughout the Diaspora, it opposes Israel’s occupation of the West Bank. But unlike most others, it actively encourages a boycott of and divestment from companies that profit from Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem: “This includes companies operating in or from occupied Palestinian territory,

exploiting Palestinian labor and scarce environmental resources, providing materials or labor for settlements, or producing military or other equipment or materials used to violate human rights or to profit from the Occupation.”

That policy in itself would be sufficient to cast a shadow on JVP, since the endorsement of any boycott at all is viewed by many people as consorting with the enemy. The truth, of course, is that boycotts can be an effective device for accomplishing worthy goals, as we learned from the Montgomery Bus Boycott (remember Rosa Parks?), and from the South Africa saga, and from a dozen other instances that are remembered with pride by the participants and with admiration by the onlookers.

As a matter of principle, a decision to boycott the West Bank is of a piece with these; it is a natural extension of the view that the occupation is odious and merits active opposition. Hence the worst that can be said of it is that it is a diversion from more comprehensive efforts to bring the occupation to an end. But that’s clearly a judgment call, and the judgment is based on the effectiveness of the effort, not on its morality.

The boycott issue gets more complicated when we see, as we daily do, that whether out of ignorance or out of malice, the kind of limited boycott JVP actively promotes is typically conflated with endorsement of the global boycott, divestment and sanctions movement. Global BDS is a Palestinian-led campaign that calls for a comprehensive boycott of all things Israeli, from academic exchanges to banks, of anything boycott-able. And JVP in fact does not — well, not exactly — endorse the global BDS movement.

Case closed? Not by a long shot. For the truth is that JVP does, in certain key respects, go well beyond the largely symbolic boycott of the West Bank alone. This one learns both from a careful reading of its website as well as from extended conversations, such as I have had these past days, with some of its key activists. On the one hand, JVP formally calls for Israelis and Palestinians to be granted the right to self-determination; on the other, it says it is “agnostic” as between a one-state and a two-state solution. It is murky regarding a right of return for Palestinian refugees. While it meticulously limits its own boycott efforts to the West Bank, it “vigorously” defends “the right of others to engage in full BDS campaigns.... We see them as a nonviolent response to the daily violence of the Israeli occupation.” And, in her remarks at the

recent JStreet conference, JVP's executive director, the very thoughtful and engaging Rebecca Vilkomerson, was unstinting in her praise for global BDS.

It may be that the imprecision in language is an attempt to satisfy a diverse constituency. But it adds up to less than a transparent presentation of self. These are not, after all, peripheral issues. Yet I remain quite uncomfortable with the notion that JVP should be barred from the communal tent. The much-publicized funding guidelines San Francisco's Jewish Community Federation recently adopted, which condemn participation in the BDS movement "in whole or in part," go much too far, since they can be interpreted to exclude even devoted Zionists who shun settlement products. Nor should endorsement of Zionism be a requirement for entry into the tent. One can and some do question the wisdom of Jewish nationalism yet feel deeply connected to the Jewish people. Perhaps, if JVP is made welcome, its members will come to see that there is a liberal Zionism that is not all that far from them.

But perhaps not. As I've said, drawing boundaries is complicated and often nasty. I'd bar those who wish Israel ill, who move casually from BDS to delegitimization — but I do not accept, not at all, that boycotts targeted to the occupation of the West Bank are inherently an endorsement of Israel's delegitimization. Insofar as JVP, or any other group, accepts Israel's right to exist and its citizens' right to self-determination, then, on balance, "in" is preferable to "out." But endorsement of global BDS is one misstep too far.