

Think Before Joining Anti-Israel Boycott

Ill-Considered Gestures May Send Wrong Message

By Leonard Fein

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True or false: Boycotts are bad.

True. And false.

Here, for example, is a good boycott, one that in fact explains the origin of the word: In 1880, an Irish landowner, in the wake of a poor harvest, offered his tenant farmers a 10% reduction in their rents. The workers, however, demanded a 25% reduction. When the owner's agent, one Charles Cunningham Boycott, sought to evict the non-paying tenants, he became an economic and social pariah. His employees stopped working in the fields, the stables, even in his own house. Local businessmen wouldn't take his money, and the postman refused to deliver his mail. Boycott's name quickly became the term for economic ostracism in English, French, German and Russian.

In more recent times, the list of boycotts gets crowded, and is likely (given social media) to soon become overflowing. Surely, however, some deserve to be engraved in our common memory. There is, of course, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which marked the beginning of Martin Luther King Jr.'s public life. A splendid boycott, with a powerful result.

Equal and opposite: The boycott, by the movie industry, of many hundreds of writers, actors, producers, composers and others who had or were alleged to have a relationship with the Communist Party. Careers were destroyed, the wounds ran deep, the scars for the most part remained raw.

And now for Israel, the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement. On July 5, the Presbyterian Church (USA) rejected by a 333 to 331 margin a boycott of three companies that are said to profit from the occupation (Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard and Motorola). Jewish organizations that had lobbied for that result celebrated the victory, narrow though it was. Less noticed was a subsequent vote (457 to 180) to support boycotts such as that of Ahava beauty products — that is, of products manufactured on settlements in the West Bank.

It is undisputed that Ahava's products are manufactured in Kibbutz Shalem, an Israeli settlement in the West Bank. That would seem to render the boycott kosher for people opposed to the occupation. So why should such people not merely refrain from buying Ahava but actually join those who are already demonstrating at Nordstrom's and other stores that feature Ahava products?

Join and thereby stand in apparent solidarity with others, more than a few of whom wish Israel ill, who have chosen to focus their concern for human rights exclusively on the Israel-Palestinian conflict, and whose signs and chants are often loathsome? Not kosher, not even close. Now, take a deep breath and look just across the street, where those who honestly worry about Israel's delegitimation have gathered in counter-demonstration.

Life is complicated. Withholding consent is a useful option. Sometimes the stated goals of a boycott are actually reached; more often, there's at least symbolic value to the action. But withholding consent can also be very messy. Which is more important: *Who* you stand with or *what* you stand for?

This much is clear: Goods manufactured in Jewish West Bank settlements should never be labeled "Made in Israel" — a position gaining considerable popularity throughout the world. Those of us who advocate a two-state solution ought to stay away from Ariel, as many Israeli artists and intellectuals have pledged to do. Surely we should not consume the fine wines, dates and beauty products of the settlements. All these acts of protest are pro-Israel, in both intent and effect. But the hard truth is that the effect is minimal, much ado about very little. Some proposed actions lack even minimal effect: A friend proposes that we regard the Green Line as Israel's boundary and go beyond it only in the context of study missions and such. But that's easier said than done. What of the settlements we "know" will survive a peace agreement, to say nothing of French Hill, Gilo, Ramot, et al.? It is also pointless: Who cares? Who'd notice?

And here's an action worthy of consideration: Doing comprehensive battle with American Jews who take charitable tax deductions for underwriting settlements — and especially with all who support the dramatic expansion of settlement in Jerusalem and its environs, an expansion that will, and soon, destroy any chance of a two-state solution.

Contact Leonard Fein at feedback@forward.com