



# Academic Engagement NETWORK

May 30, 2017

Menachem Ben-Sasson, President  
Office of the President  
Hebrew University of Jerusalem  
[hupres@savion.huji.ac.il](mailto:hupres@savion.huji.ac.il)

Dear President Ben-Sasson:

In March 2017, the Knesset passed a law barring foreign nationals who promote the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement from entry to Israel. The law also bars any who support the boycott of settlement products only. We write to you in our capacity as chair of the board and executive director, respectively, of the Academic Engagement Network (AEN) to express our deep concern that the law itself and its broad targeting are counterproductive in our work against the BDS movement in the United States.

The AEN is a national organization of faculty and administrators which opposes BDS and defends academic freedom and freedom of expression. We are also committed to stirring robust conversation about Israel among faculty on campus and to opposing antisemitism when it appears. Currently, the AEN numbers more than 450 faculty and staff on 175 campuses. Our members confront BDS during campus boycott and divestment campaigns, mentor students, advise university leaders, and act as thought leaders publishing essays and op-eds in the conversation about Israel in American universities and colleges. We do not try to shut down or bar BDS voices from campus; instead we take them on directly because we believe we have a more compelling narrative to share. Faculty play a critical and increasing role combatting BDS on campus, and AEN faculty have made a singular contribution.

In our view, the Knesset law is counterproductive because it represents a clear erosion of the principles of academic freedom and free scholarly exchange, which we strongly and openly defend. Our *Guide and Resource Book for University Leaders: Academic Freedom, Freedom of Expression, and the BDS Challenge*, which has circulated to more than 150 university presidents and chancellors, highlights the importance of free scholarly exchange. The presidential statements we catalogue in the appendices nearly always sound this special theme, specifically emphasizing the importance of academic freedom and free and open international scholarly exchange. The law, on the contrary, plays directly into the hands of BDS proponents in the U.S.: how can we oppose BDS' divisive and corrosive tactics if Israel is, in effect, openly adopting a similar strategy?

Let us repeat: the adoption and enforcement to date of the law signals that Israel willingly stands against free scholarly exchange. No less a professional scholarly association than the Association for Israel Studies harshly criticizes the ban, identifying it as anti-democratic and warning that it will prevent academic exchange with Israel. Furthermore, it could create a “chilling effect” on students and scholars who want to visit Israel to study and research, and will even prevent the association from holding conferences in Israel — something association leaders forthrightly call an “absurdity.”

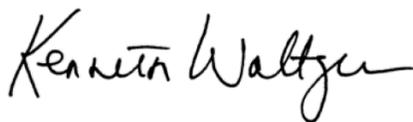
We also note that the law is opposed by some among our most important partners in the battle with BDS. We work with the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee, among others; these organizations openly criticize the Knesset law. Significantly, the law is also complicating the work of Birthright, whose trips are directed by Hillel from numerous American campuses. Birthright is one of the premier programs forging connections between young American Jews and Israel bringing students to Israel but many students are now raising questions whether if they criticize the settlements they will be permitted entry. In these and other ways, the ban makes the mission of American Jewish organizations and other anti-BDS groups more difficult to achieve.

We would appreciate if you would bring our opposition to this law and concern about its impact to the attention of other presidents of major Israeli universities.

Sincerely yours



Mark G. Yudof  
Chair, Advisory Board  
Academic Engagement Network  
President Emeritus of the University of California



Kenneth Waltzer  
Executive Director  
Academic Engagement Network  
Professor Emeritus and former Director-Jewish Studies  
Michigan State University