



Academic  
Engagement  
NETWORK

# Arguing Israel Contra BDS

Einat Wilf

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Academic Engagement Network  
Pamphlet Series  
No. 5  
August 2018

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## ABOUT AEN

The Academic Engagement Network (AEN) is an organization of faculty members, administrators, and staff members on American college and university campuses across the United States. We are committed to opposing the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, affirming academic freedom and freedom of expression in the university community, and promoting robust discussion of Israel on campus.

The AEN aims to promote more productive ways of addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In place of one-sided sloganeering reinforcing simple binaries, we advocate open debate acknowledging complexity. In place of aggressive, antidemocratic tactics galvanizing deep inter-group suspicions, we advocate respectful exchanges of ideas. We insist that the heckler's veto has no place in the academy – there is no free speech right that permits blocking free speech by others. We are committed as well to addressing antisemitism often found in BDS and anti-Israel narratives.

Network members serve as resources for reasoned discussion about Israel on campuses. They advise campus presidents, provosts, deans and other administrators on Israel, BDS, antisemitism, and related issues; organize faculty forums and public education programs; mentor students in their efforts to advance dialogue about Israel and oppose BDS on campus; encourage universities to forge and enhance U.S.-Israel academic ties, including student and faculty exchanges and research collaborations; and speak, write, participate in discussions, submit essays, and publish op eds.



## **AEN Pamphlet Series**

The Academic Engagement Network (AEN) pamphlet series is an occasional series that addresses the primary concerns of the organization: championing academic freedom on American college and university campuses, opposing the BDS movement, encouraging a robust and sophisticated discussion of topics related to Israel and the Middle East, and combating antisemitism. Authors include AEN members and other noted scholars and thinkers who contribute to the discourse on these subjects. Certain pamphlets may also be accompanied by discussions with the author in the form of recordings or podcasts.

For more information on this and any other AEN-sponsored material, please visit our website: [academicengagement.org](http://academicengagement.org).





# Arguing Israel Contra BDS

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## **Einat Wilf**

**This pamphlet represents the keynote presentation of Einat Wilf at the second annual conference of the Academic Engagement Network in Chicago, May 2017.**

**Wilf is an author, lecturer, and former Member of Knesset for the Labor Party.**

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## **Arguing Israel Contra BDS**

Thank you so much for bringing me here and for giving me the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon. Especially thank you for the opportunity to educate myself about what is going on at American campuses in terms of broader trends, very specific battles, and, of course, some hard-won victories.

I want to share with you my reflections on the larger issues of the BDS movement and Israel, and then move to some of the more specific conceptions of how I believe it is best to tell Israel's story, to analyze the conflict, and to argue our case.

For quite some time now, I've asked myself: what is going on? And the question of what is going on has to do with the fact that, as an Israeli who considers herself very much a liberal and comes from the Israeli

left, I was trying to understand how it is that those who are supposedly my colleagues, those with whom I supposedly share values, seem to be turning more and more against an idea that I hold dear, which is Zionism. Why is this becoming so much more virulent? In that question also lies the possibility of beginning to ask whether I or anyone else is right in thinking of themselves as a Zionist. If so many people who supposedly think like us on other issues that we care about turn against this issue, then we might begin to wonder, “So, maybe we should turn against this issue as well.” We are also used to thinking that Jews in general are aligned with liberalism, that a liberal order is the best protector of Jewish existence, both individually and collectively. So when those who are considered liberal turn against something that is very Jewish, such as Zionism, questions arise, and we began to wonder what is going on.

This also has to do with a bigger kind of observation that I’ve made for some time: is hatred of the Jews ever about Jews and what they do? When greater and greater segments of society turn against Jews, does this mean that Jews are doing something wrong? There are times we’d like to believe that this is the case, so we say that it is because of the occupation or because we said this or because we did that, because there is a very comforting underlying premise about it. It means that if we change what we do – we end the occupation, we do not enact these laws – then all of this will go away. But I think the answer to whether or not hatred of the Jews has ever been about the Jews is a simple “no.”

If we look to history, if we look to the ebb and the fall of hatred of Jews, the hatred has always been there, but sometimes it peaks and sometimes less so. When does it rise? It rises when there is a crisis in the society that is engaged in the hating, not when something has changed with those that are being hated.

When I began to see this rising tide of hatred, of virulence, especially the emotion and the violence that came with it, I did not turn my questions to the problem with Israel’s policies; we can discuss that, but this is not the issue. Then what is the crisis that is taking place in

the larger society and causing it to engage in this obsessive hatred? What is becoming clear is that there is a long-term crisis of liberal or left-wing thought, and maybe also in academia. And when there is a crisis of certainty, a crisis of identity, when societies don't know who they are, what they stand for, or why they exist, there is no greater comforting certainty than that the Jews are responsible. When people began to discuss the rise of intolerant liberalism recently, suddenly I said, "Bingo!" because we began to feel, even though, at first, we didn't understand, what was going on. Now it's becoming more evident, and more and more people are discussing the larger trends.

The battle that we are waging is not specifically on the issue of the legitimacy of Zionism and Israel; it is a far bigger battle. As much

What is becoming clear is that there is a long-term crisis of liberal or left-wing thought, and maybe also in academia. And when there is a crisis of certainty, a crisis of identity, when societies don't know who they are, what they stand for, or why they exist, there is no greater comforting certainty than that the Jews are responsible.

as we might all be interested in correcting the world and changing the situation, it is my belief that we should be interested first and foremost in making sure that, as this battle rages on, we are safe. If there is anything that has changed for Jews in the last few decades since the establishment of the State of Israel – which prompted the growing comfort of Jews in the United States and around the world with the idea of Jewish power – it is that, even though we recognize that growing hatred means that societies are in crisis, we are now less inclined to allow these societies to resolve their issues on our backs. And

we plan either not to be around when they do that or to fight back, and to make sure that, as they resolve their issues, we do not get hurt in the process, first and foremost, physically, but also in all other ways: intellectually, of course, but also in our ability to thrive, to have the jobs

we want, to say the things we want, and to prosper. We will defend that as societies are in crisis and we see the corresponding rise in hatred against Jews and Israel.

We need to acknowledge that this crisis is placing tremendous societal pressure, first and foremost, on young people, on students on American campuses, and it is

societal pressure to hand over more and more pounds of flesh, to more and more renounce their association with Zionism and with Israel and with almost any notion of proud, powerful Jewish existence. But what these young people are going to discover one day, as all Jews always have, is that it does not matter how many pounds of flesh you give over, or how powerfully you renounce your Zionism by saying,

“Look, I’m a good Jew, I’m not like these other Zionists, I hate Israel, I’m fighting against it, Israel is awful.” No matter how much you hand over, you will one day discover that it’s not enough.

We need to acknowledge that this crisis is placing tremendous societal pressure, first and foremost, on young people, on students on American campuses, and it is societal pressure to hand over more and more pounds of flesh, to more and more renounce their association with Zionism and with Israel and with almost with any notion of proud, powerful Jewish existence.

What we need to be fighting for is to change the environment that creates that pressure. What we have heard about [at this conference] are the first battles, and the victories that represent the initial repelling of the attack are critical. We’re getting better and better at saying “Stop! No longer, you don’t get to invade.” But ultimately, that will not be enough.

The oppositional tactics that were described [at this conference] are



good, such as going to the academic associations and asking them, “What does this have to do with anthropology or history or languages?” But over time, what we need to do is change the story, change the narrative, because, while those are specific tactics that are very good for winning specific battles, we need something greater.

I want to offer the idea that being progressive, first and foremost, means looking at individuals, civilizations, and cultures as equals by giving them the respect of actually taking them at their word and not “Westsplaining” away their motivations.

Here, I will transition to what I think we need to discuss and to argue. We have two key elements. The first, the one that is

on the attack or on the offensive, is the one that has to expose the other side, their motivations, their story. And the other element, which I don’t want to call defense because it’s much more than that, it’s a different line of offense, is to tell Israel’s story.

First, on the issue of the attack, of exposing the motivations of those who seek to distinguish Israel’s Zionism as a unique form of current evil, I want to offer a new idea, a new definition of what it means to be progressive in this context. I propose that being progressive means actually treating Arabs as equals. That means respecting what they say and taking them at their word. I know that there are neologisms now, like “mansplaining,” so maybe I’ll coin one called “Westsplaining,” when the West seeks to explain what Muslims or Arabs are saying to explain it away. If someone Arab or Muslim will say “I want to kill Jews,” their interlocutors will say that they are merely expressing pent up rage for years of colonialism. But they’re saying “I want to kill you,” so let’s start by taking them at their word.

I want to offer the idea that being progressive, first and foremost, means looking at individuals, civilizations, and cultures as equals by

giving them the respect of actually taking them at their word and not “Westsplaining” away their motivations. What does that mean? It means that when we see across the Arab and Islamic world that fighting words against Zionism – placing blame on all-powerful Jews, or promoting the idea that the Jews do not have equal rights of self determination – are all acceptable in that society, we need to conclude that this is what those individuals or governments mean. And we must accept that it doesn’t mean that doing so somehow paints them as evil or immoral. I genuinely believe that in this conflict there are no good guys and bad guys, moral guys and immoral guys. There are just small guys and big guys, and I’ll explain.

Let’s imagine for a moment what the conflict looks like from the perspective of the Arab world. The first part of it is that the Arab world is being asked to accept that the Jewish people have come home after 2000 years. Now who does that? Who comes home after 2000 years, rings the doorbell, knocks at the door and says, “Honey, I’m home after 2000 years?” Can we genuinely agree that this would have been a conflict-making situation anywhere in the world? That’s the first thing we’re asking them to accept.

Now, I certainly believe that Zionism is one of the world’s most inspiring stories of a people who rose up to change their destiny of being victims, to change their future, to pick themselves up and do something different, truly inspiring. But I’ve also learned that in this life there is a very fine line between inspiring and insane.

Truly, this is an insane story. Theodore Herzl [the father of modern Zionism] could have told you that this is how Zionism in his time was received. One of my favorite refrains is from when he published his first book, *Der Judenstaat* [The Jewish State]. It was the talk of Vienna, which was a very Jewish city at the time, kind of like New York today. In all the cafes of Vienna they talked about this crazy new book, and the common refrain was: for 2000 years the Jews waited to have their state and it had to happen to me?

So let's start by accepting that it was an insane idea and we're asking the Arab and Muslim world to accept it. By the way it's not just any people who are saying that they are coming home after 2000 years: it's the Jews, and that matters because this is where we need the new kind of progressivism I'm talking about.

Why does it matter that it's the Jews that have come back? We forget that now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we live in an era when all ideas, ways of living, forms of faith, and lifestyles are equally respected. But if we are to understand what drives this conflict – and this is what I've learned to say to students, this is how I manage to get through to them – I tell them to please leave the 21<sup>st</sup> century for a moment and put yourself in the mindset of *Game of Thrones*, as the seventh season is about to begin. What is the mantra of *Game of Thrones*? When it's not "Winter is coming," it's "You win or die." It's brutal, but in such a landscape you either win or you don't. Put yourself in that mindset, that there is a new truth, that Christ is the Messiah, or Mohammed is the Final Prophet. And with that truth, which you and your followers claim to be the final, the only truth, you are out there conquering the world.

Now, how tolerant are you going to be of a tiny pesky little people who say, "No, Christ is not the Messiah, he might be a lovely Rabbi, he's not the Messiah. And Mohammed, he's not a prophet, prophecy has been gone from the earth for centuries." If you think that you win or you die and that you have the final truth, how tolerant are you going to be of that kind of attitude? Obviously not a lot.

Thus, in both Christian and Islamic civilizations, as you know very well, Jews were accorded, at best, an inferior status. And the inferior status evolved over time to be part of the culture and theology of these civilizations, so that the Jews could only be tolerated as a miserable marginalized minority. Their misery, in fact, became testimony to what happens to people who fight, who don't accept the final truth.

This is, in my belief, a short primer for all of human history. I know it's very non-academic what I'm saying, but these problems began when

those who you were used to thinking of as your inferiors suddenly come and have the gall, or the chutzpah, to say they are equal. How well does that go over? In contrast, today, we are somehow conditioned to believe that, yes, when people claim their equality it's just "Come on in!"

I had a short political career, not a very long one, but it was long enough for me to learn one lesson, the only important lesson of politics, I think: it is in the very nature of power that no one, and that means no one, ever gives it up willingly. If you want power, you claim equality, or you want a different sharing of power structures, then you have to grab it, you have to fight for it, and you will face backlash. That is in the nature of power.

And this is what Zionism did to the Arab and Islamic world: it challenged a power structure that had existed for centuries, where Jews had a place, an inferior place. They were headed to the dustbin of history. Then, suddenly, not only were they appearing with this crazy story that they were coming home after 2000 years, they were also saying they were equal, they were a nation no less proud, no less important, than the great Arab nation, and they were laying claim to land in the midst of the Arab and Muslim world. And they were taking these two things, the crazy story of coming home after 2000 years, a people who were considered inferior, and the claim of equality, and they were doing all of that when they didn't have high population numbers.

When Israel was born, the ratio of Arabs to Jews in the region was 50-to-1. Now it is 60-to-1, so all of Israel's investments in *aliyah* [Jewish emigration to Israel] and fertility and having lots of babies has really not made much of a dent. We would probably have done much better to invest in female education in the Arab world; that would have improved the ratio much more than all our investments in *aliyah* and making babies. There was never a way that Jews could reproduce themselves out of those proportions; they don't have the numbers and they have this crazy story. In that context, of course the Arab world is going to say no to Israel. It is entirely rational, it's not about Arabs being evil and Israel being good, it's about Israel being small and the Arab world being big.

This is the context we need to bring back. The Palestinians are part of the Arab world; they are also part, broadly speaking of Islamic civilization. Their engagement in the conflict is not that of some hapless victims who are just at the mercy of outside forces. Can we bring back the progressive idea that they are agents that are making conscious decisions with consequences?

This is the context we need to bring back. The Palestinians are part of the Arab world; they are also part, broadly speaking, of Islamic civilization. Their engagement in the conflict is not that of some hapless victims who are just at the mercy of outside forces. Can we bring back the progressive idea that they are agents that are making

conscious decisions with consequences? That they are informed by their understanding of history and power from the Arab and Palestinian telling of the conflict: that the Jewish power and the sovereign equal Jews in their midst are a temporary aberration? If so, then, the occupation is not the cause of what we are witnessing; it is the outcome. Because at any given moment the Arab Palestinians had a chance to have the dignity of liberty, of sovereignty in a state of their own. But the price of that liberty, the price of that sovereignty would have been to say “yes” to the Jewish presence, to accept it as permanent and legitimate.

At least to date, the choice has been not to say yes, and this is a conscious choice. If people can make a conscious choice to say, “Better to suffer the daily humiliations of a military occupation than to suffer the far greater humiliation of accepting that aberration, that presence, as legitimate and final,” that is a conscious choice of a people who are masters of their narrative, who in their mind are resisting and suffering for something that is honorable.

Have you ever wondered why the emphasis in the Palestinian narrative is on the word “justice”? Never on the word “peace,” never on the word

“sovereignty,” never on the word “self-determination.” It is justice that they seek because, in their minds, the greatest injustice that has been committed is this undoing of an order where the Jews knew their place. That is the injustice; that is what needs to be corrected.

So, when many people hear “justice for Palestine,” what does it sound like? It sounds like we want justice for the downtrodden, right? Who doesn’t want justice for the downtrodden? But no: justice for Palestine is a very clear Arab conception that literally means injustice for the Jewish people, and that needs to be exposed. I believe that it could be easily exposed by using the tools and the language of equality and of equal rights that are supposedly tools only to be used by the other side.

In my engagement with Arabs, with Palestinians, with progressive crowds, I always ask a simple question: do you accept that the Jewish people, as a people, as a nation, have the equal right, no more or no less, to sovereignty in their land? I have yet to find large numbers of people who will respond with a resounding “yes.” I have found one such person, a Palestinian who literally paid a very high price for his positions. But in Israel, if I argue for the idea that Arab Palestinians have an equal right to sovereignty and self-determination in part of the land, I don’t need courage to hold these views; they are shared by many in Israel.

Again, this is not because Israelis are good or moral people, I want to erase that from the record; we’re a small country, so we take what we can get, and that’s why we say “yes.” But from the Palestinian perspective they don’t see why they need to say “yes.” For someone actually and clearly to say, “yes, I accept that the Jewish people have come home, that they are not foreigners, that they are not colonialists, that they are not the second Crusader states,” (which are all various synonyms for saying they are temporary) is a brave act. To say that “the Jews have a right to this land, just as we have a right to this land and therefore, we each need to have less than what we believe is our full right,” takes fortitude. A Palestinian who says such things needs to have so much courage he literally risks his life.

Nevertheless, I believe this is the most effective way for us to argue: the idea of the equal right of both collectives as indigenous people to the land. I am even willing to say, “let’s acknowledge the equal right of both peoples to claim all of the land,” but then contend that if both sides insist that all of it is theirs, we will be at war forever.

My Palestinian friend once said, “I don’t get it, I don’t get it, what do you want?” And I remember telling him, “What do you mean, it’s very simple: we want you to disappear, and you want us to disappear. Now, instead of discussing what we want, let’s discuss what we can have.” So this is what we need to ultimately acknowledge: yes, there are big dreams here on both sides, but there has to be an acknowledgment of the equal right of both indigenous collectives to the land and then an agreement about how to share and divide it.

Maybe one more word in this context: the warriors of BDS like to present themselves as non-violent; that is a really important element of their description. Now, when they use the word “non-violent,” they want you to think Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi, and they want you to put their movement in that box. But there is no necessary connection between whether a cause is honorable and how it is waged. You can have an honorable cause for which a lot of blood is shed and that is fought for violently; many honorable causes have used violence. And you can have a dishonorable cause that is fought for non-violently. Indeed, the choice to engage in non-violent battle is not because BDS supporters found religion, and not because they converted en masse to pacifism. The movement made this choice merely because all violent ways have failed. Wars failed and terrorism failed and the Arab boycott failed, so now we have come to a kind of intellectual warfare. The fact that it is waged by non-violent

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means should not blind anyone for a moment, because the end goal – the eradication of Israel – is very violent.

How could a goal be violent, but waged by non-violent means? This means that words have consequences. When Israel and Zionism are repeatedly described as all that is evil in our world, I call this the “placard strategy,” because you see it in anti-Israel placards in those demonstrations. You’ve seen those placards, right? What do they say Israel, Zionism, and the Star of David, equal?

On the other side of the equation, it never says Zionism equals the political movement for the liberation of the Jewish people in their ancient homeland. You have yet to see such a placard. Even though the people at this conference are here to fight for Israel, Zionism, and the right of Jews to support Israel, the placard strategy has been so effective that you all know the litany of charges that have been placed against Israel and Zionism: apartheid and racism and colonialism and imperialism and Nazism and genocide. And these words are chosen not because they reflect reality, but because they all share the fact that they are synonyms for evil.

How could a goal be violent, but waged by non-violent means? This means that words have consequences.

When you create a global intellectual mindset that says there is a specific evil out there, this is an invitation to violence. Because what we know about human beings is that, unless they are psychopaths, and that’s

happily the minority, human beings do not engage in violence unless they believe it’s for the good. And there is no greater good on this earth than the eradication of evil. So, in order to prepare the most extreme form of violence, you need to get people to believe that what they are about to accomplish is the most noble cause of all: the eradication of evil. And this is how a non-violent struggle can have a very violent goal. In this way, the story of Zionism has been hijacked, disfigured, trampled



upon, and made into something that no serious Zionist would recognize.

Now, I want to argue why that happened from the intersectional perspective. I want to argue that Zionism is and has the most powerful intersectional message, which is this: Zionism is not just about the Jews and not only for Jews. What, then, does Zionism really say?

First, we must acknowledge that its message is influenced because it is a daughter of the enlightenment, a daughter of modernity. If, in a non-academic sense, you want to divide all of the premodern era from the modern era, it boils down to this element: in pre-modernity, how you were born determined how you would die, and you could not challenge that because it was preordained. This was how society functioned.

But what is modernity? Modernity means that we can challenge that premise, that how we are born is not how we necessarily die. We can change anything, including gender or our financial position, because our destinies are not preordained. This is a modern idea, and Zionism is a daughter of modernity. Zionism is about people, the Jews, acknowledging that they might have been dealt some of the worst cards in history, but that didn't have to be who they were. That didn't have to be the end of the story. Victimhood does not need to be the Jewish destiny, and Jews do not need to passively wait for God or the Messiah to fix things for them. This is why Zionism was a very secular, even militantly atheist, movement at birth. What did it say to the Jewish people? It said: don't wait for the Messiah, don't wait for God, you be your own Messiah, you be the vehicle of your own redemption. The story of Zionism is about people being the vehicles of their own redemption. It's a remarkably inspiring idea. It's about the fact that Jews could be oppressed, persecuted, marginalized, even much worse, and then could change that destiny.

This is an intersectional story that Jews must share with all marginalized, oppressed people everywhere - that it can be done. But can it be done by relying on the American individualist model, which says, "Stop whining, go and succeed in life because you're facing no barriers"? No,

success is about acknowledging the barriers, the biases, the problems, and then taking collective action. Zionism is about saying that it is collective action that changes history. If you want to break down those barriers, you will not do it alone; instead, you can do it as a group.

That is powerful and that is inspiring, so why is Zionism so defamed? Precisely because of that. If people get the idea that they can succeed in changing long established power structures, what will happen in this world? People might get ideas, and that is dangerous. It is better for powerful people to make sure that Zionism is separated from blacks and feminists and gays because they

don't need to see that it's possible, that they can challenge those power structures and change them. And Zionism even has a sequel to share, an intersectional sequel, because what we have to show is that even once we begin to change our destiny, it's not the end of the story. We are constantly facing backlash, because, when you challenge long established power structures, you will have to defend your gains every day. You will never be able take them for granted. The Herzlian idea that the Jews will have a state and this will cure the world of its anti-Semitism – well, that didn't work out so well. But that is part of the lesson, that, yes, you can change your fate, you can change history, but you will need to defend your gains, and you will face backlash, and the backlash will have many forms, some of them trying to defame the ideology, the revolution, to the point that maybe no one will want to identify with it and thereby it will be rolled back.

The story of Zionism is about people being the vehicles of their own redemption. It's a remarkably inspiring idea. It's about the fact that Jews could be oppressed, persecuted, marginalized, even much worse, and then could change that destiny. This is an intersectional story that Jews must share with all marginalized, oppressed people everywhere - that it can be done.

That's the story that we need to bring back. And it's a story that allows us to create amazing coalitions and hopefully to break through to those who are saying that we cannot enter the room and, in many ways, perhaps unbeknownst to them, are playing into that backlash.

And I think those are the key elements. They might sound fanciful at this moment, but I believe that, as we move from making small, effective, reactive victories, we need to move to change the story. Because our ability and especially the ability of our young people to thrive, to feel confident, to know that they can live comfortably in an era of Jewish power and not be challenged, depends on the fact that they will understand that we have a different story to tell and that they, even though they live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are subject still to very powerful forces who want the Jews to know what their place in the world should be.





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