Feminism and Zionism

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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 topicsrelated 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.

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Janet Freedman

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Introduction

On March 7, 2017, *Bustle* political editor Emily Shire wrote an op-ed piece for the *New York Times*, asking "Is there space for Zionists in the International Women's Day Strike?" scheduled for the next day. Her concerns were based on the strike's platform, which included advocacy for the "decolonization of Palestine."[1]

Shire's article focused considerable social media attention on the subject of Zionism in the feminist movement, including a rejoinder in *The Nation* by Linda Sarsour, executive director of the Arab American Association of New York and part of the leadership team of both the Women's March on January 21, and the International Women's Day Strike on March 8.[2] Sarsour asserted that there was no place for women who support Israel without questioning or critique, a position she

justified by stating that the women's movement must support the rights of all women, including Palestinians.

A lively and contentious debate ensued; some writers and commenters chose to point out that Sarsour was not calling for a condemnation of Israel per se, but a critique of its government; others emphasized that claims that the movement aims to support "all women" are belied by the singling out of Israel for condemnation in a world filled with egregious misogyny and violence against women. Some Jews offered support for Sarsour because she had led a fundraising drive to repair desecrated Jewish grave sites in St. Louis and Philadelphia in the previous month – and because they agreed with her position.

The role of self-proclaimed feminists in general, and Jewish feminists in particular, in supporting BDS campaigns, has not received the attention and analysis it warrants. I learned about this firsthand through my involvement with the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA), and, at the Academic Engagement Network's 2017 National Conference, I spoke about these experiences.

This pamphlet expands on those remarks. I will discuss anti-Zionism and antisemitism within the feminist movement; summarize my experiences as a progressive Jewish feminist within NWSA; describe the process and tactics which were used to promote a BDS resolution in that organization; and assess where we are today and how we might respond to the ever-changing tactics of the BDS movement, including the charge that feminism and Zionism are incompatible.

Definitions

I will begin with a definitional framework:

Feminism - In my writing and teaching, I emphasize that feminism has no single or static definition. My own practice is well-expressed by Marilyn Frye, who wrote that feminism is the continual "unfurling of new vision," always welcoming and incorporating fresh insights. Many of my

students also have embraced bell hooks' definition:

> the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular class of women. It does not privilege women over men … Feminism 'directs our attention to systems of domination and the inter-relatedness of sex, race and class oppression.'[3]

Intersectionality - In 1989, legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to apply this inter-relatedness to a legal problem that emerged when five black women sued General Motors on the basis of race and gender discrimination. Crenshaw revealed that while anti-discrimination law separated the two characteristics, African American women and other women of color experience discrimination that results from the complex interactions between these identities and cannot be addressed by looking at race and gender as distinct categories. Since that time, feminist theorists have sought to understand the phenomenon and apply the term to many dimensions of oppression and to consider how some identities are privileged and reinforce power relations.

The term has traveled a distance from its origins; it has entered popular culture and is invoked by "woke" folks, as in this definition from the Urban Dictionary: "Concept used to describe ways in which shitty social constructs like isms & phobias are interconnected (intersectional! geddit?)."[4] Additionally, because some have applied the concept of intersectionality to unite the struggles of black Americans and other marginalized communities with those of Palestinians, it has provoked many debates in discussions of feminism, antisemitism and anti-Zionism.

Zionism - When I am speaking in feminist settings, I define Zionism as the right of Israel to exist as a state. Dictionary definitions of Zionism vary slightly, but here is one: "a movement for (originally) the re-establishment and (now) the development and protection of a Jewish nation in what is now Israel."[5]

Antisemitism - The U.S. Department of State has adopted the working definition of antisemitism by the European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia: "anti-Semitism is a certain perception of Jews which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of anti-Semitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."[6] Additionally, a composite of dictionary definitions describe antisemitism as hostility, prejudice or discrimination against Jews as a national, ethnic, religious, or racial group.

The Linking of Women's Rights and Anti-Zionism: The United Nations Women's Conferences

The first of four United Nations Women's Conferences dedicated to "the advancement of women everywhere, in all spheres of public and private life" and placing gender equality at the center of the global agenda took place in Mexico City in 1975.[7] The conference addressed the abysmal conditions of women throughout the world, with many lacking voting rights and many more whose lives were limited by poverty, rape, abuse, disease and illiteracy. Along with pledges to secure equal access to education, employment opportunities, political participation, health services, housing, nutrition, and family planning, the delegates passed the first "Zionism=Racism" resolution by a UN-sponsored gathering, several months before the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 3379 equating Zionism with racism.

Neither vote was a surprise. During the Cold War era, the Soviet Union reversed its initial support of the Jewish state, which had included endorsing partition and sanctioning military aid from Czechoslovakia during Israel's War of Independence in 1948. Subsequently, the USSR, in an effort to gain favor with Arab nations and to embarrass the U.S. government, took the lead in alleging that Zionism was a form of racism akin to Nazism, and consistently used the UN as a forum to advance this doctrine. Thus the controversies that preceded the international women's conferences were characterized by Cold War politics in which

women's issues were often used as part of the political machinations of international power struggles. Despite the 1991 reversal of the "Zionism is Racism" resolution following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the UN and its related agencies continue to provide institutional support for anti-Israel sentiments and resolutions.

Ms. Magazine Responds

Author and activist Letty Cottin Pogrebin attended the second UN Women's Conference, held in Copenhagen in 1980, where the resolution was reaffirmed. Given the history of "Zionism equals Racism" propaganda in the UN, perhaps she should not have been shocked to discover that national political interests eclipsed the universal notion of sisterhood she expected. She reluctantly concluded that "feminism might be helping to empower some women who hate Jews."[8] After the conference, Pogrebin spent the next 18 months gathering stories of 80 other feminists that provided the basis for her widely read article, "Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement" in the June 1982 issue of *Ms. Magazine*, which is still worth examining in its entirety today.[9] In the article, Pogrebin identified five problems which she felt characterized and supported the presence of antisemitism in the feminist movement.

Pogrebin spent the next 18 months gathering stories of 80 other feminists that provided the basis for her widely read article, "Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement" in the June 1982 issue of *Ms. Magazine*, which is still worth examining in its entirety today.

Her first observation was that many feminists failed to see the parallels between misogyny and antisemitism. Those who did, however, understood that "Jews are women of the world; women are the Jews of the world." In other words, at the same time that both women and

Jews are oppressed for their inferiority, the notion of a nefarious "female power," akin to the stereotype of an insidious "Jewish power" is used to justify their oppression.

The second issue Pogrebin highlighted was that antisemitism exists on both the right and left sides of the political spectrum, with Holocaust deniers and trivializers on both sides, and calls for what Jews should and should not do. She noted here that claims that anti-Zionism was not antisemitism obscured a similar "bottom line – an end to the Jews."

Pogrebin described "three I's" in setting out her third indicator of antisemitism:

- *Invisibility* from feminist consciousness: Jews were everywhere in the women's movement, but unseen as *Jews*;

- *Insults*: historically and currently, slurs, Jew-baiting and outright persecution occurred in feminist settings, but were not acknowledged even by those experiencing them;

- *Internalized oppression:* as examples, Pogrebin recalled the words of Rosa Luxemburg, the late 19th and early 20th century socialist theorist and activist – and Jew – who said "don't pester me with your special Jewish sorrow," and cited Andrea Dworkin's observation that within the feminist movement it is acceptable to talk about an enslaved great grandparent, but NOT to talk about relatives who were murdered in the Holocaust.

Pogrebin next discussed how antisemitism was present in critiques of the Jewish religion. That Orthodox Jews thanked God that they were not born a woman was cited as proof that patriarchy was rooted in Judaism. Jesus was held up as a "feminist," and the Old Testament's demanding God was juxtaposed with the forgiving message of the New Testament. Those feminists who celebrated goddesses rather than God also held Jews accountable for destroying goddess worship, although goddess cults

had been overthrown long before the establishment of Judaism (which Pogrebin notes was an historic step forward for females).

Pogrebin devoted the last of her five signals of antisemitism to an exploration of the tensions between Black and Jewish feminists, lamenting that there was sometimes a contest for comparing burdens. She recognized that because second wave feminism emerged from predominately Jewish groups, what was disparagingly termed "White feminism" was often identified with Jews.

I was pleased that Pogrebin's article brought widespread attention to concerns with which I was well-acquainted, both through having read much of the material she referenced and from having experiences that resonated with those of her interviewees. What was missing from her piece, however, was an awareness of the extent and depth of anti-Israel feeling within the Jewish feminist community, including what I experienced among some members of the National Women's Studies Association.

The National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) and Its Jewish Caucus

As an early participant in the formation of women's studies programs, I joined NWSA shortly after its founding in 1977, glad to have an organization that brought together faculty doing research and scholarship, developing courses, and establishing programs in the new field. The proverbial "elephant in the room" metaphor pertained to Jews within NWSA. As Pogrebin noted, Jewish women had been prominent in the development of the women's liberation movement of the late '60s and '70s, and, consequently, had played key roles in the creation of the field of women's studies. But a critique of "white, middle-class" domination of feminism developed in the 1980s within many segments of the feminist movement including NWSA.

Jewish members of the organization did not acknowledge that their overrepresentation in second wave feminism made them especially

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vulnerable to this assessment and they advocated strongly for making previously marginalized voices central. But it was difficult to hide the peculiar position of Jews within the organization. Efforts by Jewish feminists to include antisemitism in NWSA's mission statement that opposed racism and other forms of oppression passed only after including both Arabs and Jews as targets of antisemitism. This negated the fact that the term was coined by the German political writer and avowed racist Wilhelm Marr in the 1870s to denote hatred of Jews as a particular racial group, and has been used since that time with that specific meaning.

Founding NWSA member Evelyn Torton Beck asserted that the failure to understand and include antisemitism as a feminist issue was in itself an example of antisemitism that manifested itself in other ways, too, such as leaving out "Jewish" in the ongoing multicultural dialogues within the association.[10] At a time when homophobia was still an issue within the women's movement, Beck's acknowledgement that it was easier to come out as a lesbian than it was to identify as a Jew resonated with NWSA's Jewish members. Some of us realized our collaboration with possible antisemitism; we did not want to be stereotyped as "pushy Jews" by including our own issues in the host of oppressions and -isms addressed by the organization. Beck and one of her graduate students, Mindy Sue Shapiro, organized a positive response to what we now clearly saw as antisemitism, within NWSA and sometimes within us as Jews. They founded a Jewish Caucus to address the invisibility of Jews as an identity category within the organization.

The Caucus became a place where Jews could address the issues that affected them as *Jewish* feminist activists within NWSA, on their campuses and beyond. Shabbat services became a regular part of every conference. For several years, "pre-conferences" were held during which members met for a day to share aspects of their personal and professional lives and forge working connections and friendships. Conference sessions were planned and presented on the diversity of Jewish experience and how to weave this rich variety into the women's studies curriculum. After much discussion and planning, the NWSA even devoted a plenary session to the diverse experiences of Jewish women.

The membership and programs of the Jewish Caucus challenged the notion that "Jewish" and "white, middle class" were synonymous. Sephardic women, working class and poor feminists, the legacy of the Holocaust, Jews of color, lesbians, Jewish women with disabilities, women exploring ageing and ageism from a Jewish feminist perspective, women reclaiming Yiddish as a literary language, women engaged in Jewish textual study, and revising or creating feminist-friendly Jewish rituals were among the themes of conference panels.

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Among these, too, were sessions describing efforts that some Jewish feminists were making to recognize the national aspirations of Palestinians. Many members of the Jewish Caucus, including myself, had been involved in leftist Jewish organizations. A *havurah* (Hebrew for "fellowship," usually denoting communal prayer and study groups) in which I was active in the 1970s discussed the need for both Israel and the PLO to move from intransigent positions toward a two-state solution. Some members of the Jewish Caucus were involved in the New Jewish Agenda (NJA), an organization with the mission to provide "a

Jewish voice among progressives and a progressive voice among Jews." From 1980-1992, NJA chapters across the United States advanced five major campaigns: peace in Central America, Jewish feminism, economic and social justice, worldwide nuclear disarmament, and Middle East peace. The agendas and activism of these campaigns overlapped and informed each other, and the NJA's delegation to the 1985 UN Women's Conference in Nairobi is credited with organizing a successful dialogue among Jewish, African-American, and Arab women that offered a positive rejoinder to the Zionism=Racism resolution and led to the initiation of a Palestinian/Israeli women's organization.

NJA's feminist task group advocated for lesbian and gay rights, revealed how the stereotype of Jewish wealth masked widespread poverty among Jewish women, joined with the National Council of Jewish Women to expose battering and incest in Jewish communities, and worked with non-Jewish feminists to fight racism within the feminist movement. Their newsletter, *Gesher* (Hebrew for "bridge"), evolved into *Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and Our Friends* in 1990. A number of Jewish Caucus members and attendees at NWSA conferences wrote for the publication, which drew "on the traditional Jewish values of justice and repair of the world and insights honed by the feminist, lesbian and gay movements."

One Jewish Caucus member shared in a *Bridges* article her long involvement in actions supportive of Palestinian rights, including Women in Black, an organization founded in 1988 by Israeli women to demonstrate their solidarity with Palestinians following the outbreak of the First Intifada. "Our history of oppression and of fighting for social justice - which is how I define being Jewish - makes me feel compelled to fight against the oppression done by Jews in Israel … that 'Jews are doing to Palestinians similar things that used to be done to them.'"[11]

It is likely that the author's views were shared by a number of other Caucus participants. Although her commitment to social justice resonated, that was just one part of what being "Jewish" meant to me. At the time, I saw her perspective as one among many ways members of

the Caucus expressed their commitments as Jewish feminists; eventually it became the dominant conversation in that group and an agenda for the National Women's Studies Association.

As the years passed, membership in the Jewish Caucus waned. I do not know if the growing expression of anti-Israel sentiment from a number of members contributed to this. Some of the women with whom I had become close shared their reasons for leaving both NWSA and the Caucus. Several faced illnesses; others began new careers outside the academy; some objected to the turn to postmodernism and even "post-feminism" by some of their colleagues. In the early 2000s, I, too, stopped attending conferences. My own temporary departure was due primarily to family concerns; I was welcoming grandchildren and responding to my mom's needs for more company and care.

Coming Home to a Changed Community

In 2009, I returned to NWSA. Before my four- or five year hiatus, I had always felt my conference attendance was a "coming home." Yes, I expected contentious debates, and the sessions filled with the arcane language of postmodernism stretched my patience (but encouraged me to overcome my resistance and read and learn). I was particularly disappointed to discover that the Jewish Caucus had in the interim become inactive, and immediately joined a few others in reapplying to the Association for official recognition. The Caucus was reinstated, albeit with a reduced membership. Those who were still involved continued a commitment to meet, not for a full day, but for a gathering the evening before the conference. We also continued to sponsor a Shabbat service that was informal enough to be welcoming to the many Caucus members who described themselves as secular Jews, and to which all conferees, regardless of religious or irreligious persuasions, were invited.

Among the dozen or so who attended the NWSA business meetings, probably more than half were engaged within and beyond the Association in sharp critiques of Israel and unquestioning advocacy for

Palestinians. Angela Davis was the keynote speaker at the conference and strenuously advanced this perspective. And now the BDS movement, a campaign begun in 2005 by a coalition of Palestinian organizations, was a focal point of organizing efforts.

Coming Out as a Zionist

I now had a different sense of myself as a Jew and a different relationship to Israel. In response to the growing attacks on Israel within NWSA, I submitted a proposal to participate in a roundtable at the 2012 conference sponsored by the Jewish Caucus. In using Hillel's maxim, "If I Am Not For Myself, Who Will Be For Me? If I Am Only For Myself What Am I?" as the title, I had acknowledged to myself that I often quoted that familiar adage to affirm that my concerns were not focused on my Jewish identity. But the climate of the NWSA conferences and the growing hostility to Israel in other progressive organizations made me aware that I needed to address the first sentence. "If I am not for myself who will be for me?" And I wondered: if it was not now, then when would it be?

My proposal was accepted. That the response to my sharing this with a few colleagues and friends was "better you than me," and "that's courageous," indicated to me the importance of "coming out" as a Zionist.

My short remarks acknowledged the separations, differences, and divisions that characterized discussions on Israel/Palestine and urged that reading, dialogue, and debate be the path to stronger advocacy for both Israeli and Palestinian rights. I called for explaining the meanings of the words we use in our discourse about Israel and Palestine, and advocated the reclamation of the word Zionism, the varied meanings of which must be explored to underpin discussions about the complex history of Israel which often is unclear to both its supporters and detractors.

I shared that my own efforts to listen and learn about the multiple connotations and historical shifts had led to new understandings, and, sometimes, new contradictions, which are illuminated by yet more reading, dialogue, and debate. I recalled that my own notions of Zionism had been shaped by attending a Jewish summer camp, where many of the dynamic counselors were secular labor Zionists who intended to make *aliyah* – to move to Israel and help create a socialist utopia. Their vision not only influenced my view of Israel; it likely led to my attraction to democratic socialism as a path toward economic and social equality in this country as well.

My remarks affirmed that much had changed since the establishment of the state of Israel, which most of the world had celebrated. I stated that my support for Israel did not mean I was not critical of many of the policies of the state, and those of many other countries, including my own. Yet my objections had not led me to the conclusion that Israel, or the United States, should be destroyed. Instead of denying Israel's right to exist, I exercised my right and responsibility to speak out, as many Israeli citizens can and do, to disagree with those whose approaches stood in the way of a two-state solution.

I began my talk with a question: "How many people in this room feel that Israel should not exist?" No one responded. But in the months following that talk, organizing efforts against Israel increased, and soon plans were promulgated by others to place a BDS resolution before the membership.

An Assault on Academic Freedom and Democracy

In 2015, the NWSA conducted an electronic poll of its membership and passed a resolution supporting the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (BDS). Unlike most other academic associations, there was no debate about this resolution within NWSA. I knew its passage was a foregone conclusion, but I was devastated nonetheless. The resolution itself was an assault on academic freedom in every regard. But the strategy used to implement the resolution was also an abrogation

of democratic processes that are central to feminist and progressive movements.

I would have felt marginally better if the resolution had been passed after substantive debate or at least *some* thoughtful consideration. But those who questioned BDS as a strategy to promote peace between Israelis and Palestinians were placed in the "enemy camp," assumed to be opposed to justice, and made objects of scorn and vitriol. The zeal with which the BDS faction argued for the passage of the resolution was often in contrast with an awareness of history or a respect for the accuracy of information brought to their advocacy.

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As the 2015 conference proceeded, I discovered that many people I asked about the resolution had not read it. Only 35% of the membership voted. I concluded that apart from the very vocal core of BDS proponents, which included the organization's leaders who used their position to introduce and champion the passage of the resolution, most NWSA members did not feel they needed to explore the issues and make a knowledge-based decision. The general attitude was "If *they* say it's progressive and feminist," it must be. Yielding decisions to perceived authority seems to me to be among the greatest challenges to academic freedom. This trend needs to be named, and redressed in work against BDS.

The erosion of dialogue is embedded in an assumption that there is a deeper analysis that allows for adoption without discussion or debate. The NWSA webpage notes that the concerns of the founders of the organization expressed by the question "Where are the women?" are

now "overly simple." A new mission emphasizes global perspectives and intersectionality, the recognition that interlacing systems of oppression must be understood and addressed. Ironically, while equality and broad inclusion are repeatedly invoked, the participatory group processes that further these concepts and which characterized my early experiences in NWSA have given way to more authoritarian approaches. For example, a top-down structure has now promulgated rules that require a minimum number of participants for the formation and continuance of interest groups, task forces and caucuses, in contrast to a structure that, for many years, had encouraged the ongoing development and integration of new ideas and diverse perspectives in the organization. The membership has barely protested; I am part of the "barely."

It is now all but impossible to divert from, let alone contest, the anti-neoliberal, anti-imperialist, anti-"the West" – Israel, of course, to be included here – mission of the organization, which is supported by and then sustains the curriculum of Cultural Studies and Women's Gender and Sexuality programs.

Here's a paradox. While participants are giving papers on "Resisting Hegemonies," the theme of a recent NWSA conference, members are accepting and embracing hegemony – defined as the "relatively dominant position of a particular set of ideas and their associated tendency to become commonsensical and intuitive, thereby inhibiting the dissemination or even the articulation of alternative ideas."[12] It is now all but impossible to divert from, let alone contest, the anti-neoliberal, anti-imperialist, anti-"the West" – Israel, of course, to be included here – mission of the organization, which is supported by and then sustains the curriculum of Cultural Studies and Women's Gender and Sexuality programs.

I myself have read widely in feminist and cultural studies and find merit in some of the analyses. I wish there were a space within NWSA to express where my responses resonate or differ. But exchanges are not encouraged that do not advance a particular interpretive framework and worldview. And more than a few in this world also see free speech as another aspect of the demonic neoliberal West ideology. But I have also seen that those who claim that civil liberties are meaningless in the neoliberal state continue to demand *their* academic freedom to advance this position in their writing and teaching. And the justifications for dismantling the many and egregious flaws of capitalism are not accompanied by proposals for alternatives.

While the realities of the Trump administration seem to give credence to an analysis that obeisance to the market economy is subsuming democratic values in the service of the one percent, I remain firm in my belief that, with citizen awareness and participation, our institutions are able to counter attacks on our freedoms. The hopeful alternatives that this writer has studied advocate that freedoms that have been "trumped" can be recovered, not by yielding to a despairing analysis of inevitable cooptation, but by using the ample freedoms we still have to demand government accountability and caring as well as respectful behavior of each of us to one another.

My Experience in 2015

With the BDS resolution to be voted upon by the membership within weeks, I accepted an offer to speak on a panel of four presenters. This was the sole opportunity to present a divergent viewpoint on the resolution at the conference. The Rabbi we had engaged to conduct a Shabbat service and I spoke against the resolution. I believe we two were the only voices at the conference publicly opposed to it.

I used my time on the panel to demonstrate how the "Frequently Asked Questions" appended to the resolution and intended to allay concern about its content instead provided the very reasons it should be rejected. The FAQ responding to apprehensions about whether the

BDS resolution could be seen as antisemitic was addressed with this rejoinder: "(W)hat is really anti-Semitic is the attempt to identify all Jews with a philosophy that many find abhorrent to the traditions of social justice and universality that Judaism enshrines." I observed that such presumptive, condescending language reprises the ancient appeal to the "good" Jew, in this case one who sides with those who see Israel as a demonic entity. The tactic of seeking out the exceptional members of a despised group is one that has long been used to reinforce despicable racism and antisemitism.

I also spoke against the egregious assault on academic freedom found in the explication in the FAQs of activities that would violate the boycott. Not only would a seminar talk in partnership with or sponsored by an Israeli institution not be allowed, but even telephone conversations would be subject to the boycott. "By itself a conversation with an Israeli academic does not constitute a violation of the boycott. However, institutional partnership is subject to the boycott; therefore we urge academics, in exercising their own academic freedom, to refuse all collaboration with complicit institutions and other representative."[13]

Again, I began my talk by asking if there were people in the audience who thought Israel should not exist. This time one of the co-panelists supporting the BDS resolution immediately shouted "That's not a fair question!" When the panel concluded she stated that she could not support the state of Israel as now governed.

A Surprise That Should Not Have Surprised Me

Imagine my surprise in 2016 when I picked up Angela Davis' book *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine and the Foundation of a Movement* and read,

> Recently I had the opportunity to participate on a panel of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) Conference, and the NWSA has never taken a position on Palestine, due to Zionist influences, I would say. In

> a large plenary gathering with perhaps 2500 people, during a panel on Palestine, someone asked whether we could take a floor vote, whether people there wanted the NWSA to take a strong position in support of BDS, and virtually everyone in the audience stood up. This was so unprecedented. There may have been ten or twenty people sitting down, but the sustained applause, it was actually a very exciting (sic) to experience.[14]

Davis disingenuously implies that the action at the 2014 plenary was spontaneous when, in fact, through conference theme choices and speakers at plenary sessions, organizers had been planning for such an event for some time. The plenary session on Palestine, at which a call for a BDS resolution received an ovation, was planned with no consultation with the Jewish Caucus. The "Jewish voice" was solely that of Rebecca Vilkomerson, Executive Director of Jewish Voice for Peace (a pro-BDS organization), and included no pro-Israel speaker. After the panelists had presented their invectives against Israel, one of them asked people to stand in support of a BDS resolution. I was not there but received a call from someone in the room who told me tearfully that she was afraid not to stand.

In my 2012 NWSA talk, I used the "Z word" because I could not recall that the term had *ever* been embraced as a positive within the organization. Davis' suggestion that there were "Zionist influences" is outrageous, yet I checked with others who had attended conferences I had missed to determine if there could be *any* credence to her charges; no one had ever seen evidence of this. I can only conclude that *I,* perhaps the lone spokesperson for Zionism within the NWSA, am the "Zionist influence."

Suggestions for Action

The following are my suggestions for how faculty members can work toward fostering a more positive climate on campus and in academic associations.

1. *Ask students how you can be helpful before offering advice:*

I have been privileged to have formed close relationships with a number of students at Brandeis University, where I have been a scholar at the Women's Studies Research Center for almost a decade. Through a student-scholar partnership program, I have been able to hire a student each semester to assist me with my research and, with several colleagues, initiate a Student Outreach Program through which scholars and undergraduate students have created ongoing initiatives. We publicize and attend each other's programs and have created a number of joint projects and programs to encourage cross-generational dialogues to learn with and from one another. Some are Jewish; some are not. Most embrace Brandeis University's commitment to social justice and have "progressive" views on many issues, including Israel/Palestine.

Two years ago, I hired a student partner whom I discovered was an observant Jew, a Zionist, and a progressive queer activist. We have had many conversations about how she has navigated the complex dynamics of these several parts of her wonderful self. I was saddened to discover that, in her experience, while there are many faculty who are supporting students who are not Zionists, she did not feel there was a support network of faculty or others in the Jewish community beyond the campus (other than what she characterizes as "the right"), with whom she could share her thoughts and work to develop positive rejoinders to the anti-Israel litany. I admire how she found her place(s) to express her passions. She was active in the Queer Resource Center as a counselor and organizer; had a leadership role in the Conservative movement organization on campus; led a Hebrew a cappella group, and set forth to realize her post-graduation plans to move to Israel. She will begin her Israli Defense Forces (IDF) service in Fall 2017.

Writing in December 2015, AEN Advisory Board Chair Mark Yudof urged that we support students with empathy and understanding and resist the impulse to "helicopter in with ideas that do not resonate with them."[15] Thus I am sympathetic with the student Hillel leader who very recently shared her discomfort about the advice of one of her Board

members that she oppose strongly "intersectionality" both at Hillel and in other involvements in the university. This young woman is immersed in Jewish life. She also is committed to social justice theory and activism and does not share the view that the term intersectionality is anathema. She felt she was asked to take a stand based on a word that the Board member did not fully understand – which brings me to my next point.

2. *Language and Activism: the words to say it, the ways to do it:*

I began this pamphlet by offering a definitional framework for the key terms in the feminism/Zionism debate. I chose the word "framework" deliberately because language is always changing and definitions are fluid and contextual. Many words are invoked to signify membership in or solidarity with a group or cause, yet in some instances the speaker may not realize what they are committing to or judging in employing a term. That is the case with the words I discussed earlier: feminism, intersectionality, Zionism, and antisemitism.

When we invoke one of these words, or other terms that are used in debates about BDS, it is important to define the terms as we understand them, and extend an invitation for others in the conversation to share their understanding. I have found that when I offer my definition of Zionism – the right of Israel to exist as a state – those with whom I am speaking usually agree with me. Yet in recent times, there are those who do not, and as eager as I am to embrace coalition politics on a wide range of issues, if a person or group does not support this basic assumption, I will seek others with whom to work toward a resolution of the serious, but, I must believe, still resolvable Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

We need to find every possible opening for respectful dialogue. The two AEN conferences I have attended have modeled the respect for varying viewpoints that must underlie the work to address the problems we are facing on American campuses. A commitment to academic freedom requires welcoming speech communities that engage in listening, asking for clarification, considering how the words used to describe or speak

with others would be received if addressed to us, having conversations that help us think things through together, and exploring ways to build alliances based on mutual respect.

Within AEN and in many other settings where BDS is debated, a common point of contention is whether critiques of Israel are antisemitic or anti-Zionist. In the past, I was among those who felt that it was possible to separate criticism of the policies of the Israeli government from hostility or prejudice against Jews. My experience at NWSA as the BDS resolution was promulgated and supported made me realize that the two are often entwined.

Finding "the words to say it and the ways to do it" is a challenge in an increasingly polarized political climate. But there are models which address the barriers to effective activism for social justice that result from the verbal bullying, political purity, shaming, and public mocking that occurred during the recent presidential election and on a number of college campuses.

Yet making accusations will inevitably be met with defensiveness and antagonism. When I sense antisemitism, I don't let the matter go unaddressed. But, rather than charging an interlocutor with bigotry, I state how I experienced the comment or behavior. To give an example: "When you state that Jews who support Israel are not exemplifying 'Jewish values,' I feel that I will be accepted only if I meet your criterion of the "good" Jew – one who shares your views about Israel/Palestine. I'd like to talk about this with you." Sometimes, the person doesn't care to know my feelings, but other discussions have been fruitful in revealing that creating separations among members of a disdained group is a device that has been applied frequently to women, people of color, Muslims, and other marginalized groups, including Jews.

Finding "the words to say it and the ways to do it" is a challenge in an increasingly polarized political climate. But there are models which address the barriers to effective activism for social justice that result from the verbal bullying, political purity, shaming, and public mocking that occurred during the recent presidential election and on a number of college campuses. One example was a recent conference I attended on "Calling IN the Calling OUT Culture," which offered specific skills and strategies for building community across differences – political, racial, gender, age, ability, and more.

I am urging that we use language with care and respect for others and ourselves, but sometimes even the brightest and most committed activists are silent. In her book, *Nice Jewish Girls*, alluded to above, Evi Beck recalled her uncritical enthusiasm for Rita Mae Brown's novel, *Rubyfruit Jungle*, one of the earliest mainstream fictional works about lesbianism.

> As an emerging lesbian, I couldn't admit/protest that the leading fiction writer used age-old Anti-Semitic stereotypes. I simply couldn't afford to take it in. So I kept silent. In those early years of struggle it seemed unworthy to make a fuss. And worse, - it seemed divisive. I could not yet claim my anger. I wanted too much to belong.[16]

Progressives and feminists and progressive feminists still want to belong. I have to acknowledge that I have spent considerable time trying to convince people with whom I work on a myriad of social justice issues that I am a "good Jew." I am working hard to change what may have been internalized antisemitism that I brought to my political activism. When I became involved in progressive and feminist movements, I often assumed the lead in embracing a "radical" position, sometimes repressing reservations I had about the prevailing opinion.

For example, there were instances when I wanted to be the first to circulate a resolution against a particular political position of the

government of the state of Israel lest I appeared to lack a proactive stance on rights for Palestinians. Learning to speak clearly about what I understand about the events of the moment in an ever-changing political dynamic without weighing whether it is the "correct" progressive stance is liberating. Granted, it is hard to critique the "left" without being associated with the "right" and vice versa. But I want to desist in attempts to ingratiate myself with either "side" in the complex Israel/Palestine debates.

3. *Keep marching, but know with whom*

Like many of you, I am marching, writing and speaking out against the fiats of the current administrations in the U.S. and Israel. But before I take action, I am evaluating which advance democratic interchanges and which do not. A look at the platforms for the January Women's March the day after Trump's inauguration, and the International Women's Strike a few weeks later on March 8, is instructive.

The platform of the January Women's March presented a host of feminist and progressive issues; no mention was made of Israel/Palestine. A little more than six weeks later, on International Women's Day, another march took place. But the platform for the International Women's Strike on March 8 differed. It echoed some of the wording of the January event, but expanded the language and used tropes that thread through not only the NWSA mission and conference themes, but most academic associations supporting the BDS movement. Here is an excerpt from the section entitled "For an Antiracist and Anti-imperialist Feminism."

> Against the open white supremacists in the current government and the far right and anti-Semites they have given confidence to, we stand for an uncompromising anti-racist and anti-colonial feminism. This means that movements such as Black Lives Matter, the struggle against police brutality and mass incarceration, the demand for open borders and for immigrant rights and

for the decolonization of Palestine are for us the beating heart of this new feminist movement.[17]

We need to reveal and oppose the hijacking of feminism and progressivism by those whose presumptuous behavior is at sharp odds with their rhetoric and self-presentation, but will go unchallenged unless we recommit ourselves to critical inquiry, dialogue and discussion.

Most people who joined the March 8 activities were unaware that they were endorsing an anti-Zionist agenda that was not included in the January event. If Rasmea Odeh, a principal planner in the March 8 event, had not been in the news for accepting a plea bargain that allows her to escape a prison sentence for failing to disclose to U.S. immigration authorities her imprisonment in Israel for terrorist attacks that killed two young Israelis, there probably would have been no discussion at all of the incorporation of "the decolonization of Palestine" in what many now embrace as the common manifesto of "this new feminist movement."

We need to reveal and oppose the hijacking of feminism and progressivism by those whose presumptuous behavior is at sharp odds with their rhetoric and self-presentation, but will go unchallenged unless we recommit ourselves to critical inquiry, dialogue and discussion. One clear example of such hijacking is the incident that took place at the Chicago Dyke March on June 25, 2017, when three Jewish marchers were asked to leave because their Jewish star on their rainbow flag was making some people "uncomfortable."[18]

4. *Should you stay or should you go?*

Despite (or maybe because of) my dismay about the passage of the 2015 BDS resolution by NWSA, I decided to return to the 2016 conference with the distant hope of promoting a counter-narrative to its pervasive

anti-Israel ideology, and I have remained a member because I believe that removing alternative voices is yielding to the BDS bullies. I am uncertain about attending future conferences, but am encouraged that some former Jewish Caucus activists are requesting that the current co-chairs organize a discussion of the anti-Semitic ousting of Jewish participants at the Chicago Dyke March.

I think there should be a continuing presence of Jews within this and other academic associations representing the many fields to which we have made and continue to make significant contributions. If we are not there to speak for ourselves as Jews, who will speak for us?

I am also hopeful that there is still the chance that Jewish representation within NWSA can encourage scholarly work on the diversity of Jewish experience and culture and how these can be integrated into the Women and Gender Studies curriculum. I think there should be a continuing presence of Jews within this and other academic associations representing the many fields to which we have made and continue to make significant contributions. If we are not there to speak for ourselves as Jews, who will speak for us?

Because I disagree with BDS and anti-Israel activism does not mean that I have abandoned my sustained commitments to work against racism, Islamophobia, homophobia, economic injustice, and other oppressions. I speak out to oppose the anti-Zionist statements in the platforms of Black Lives Matter, the International Women's Strike, and other groups because I am convinced that the focus on Israel, among all the countries of the world that need policy and leadership changes, is unjust, inimical to the resolution of the Israel/Palestine conflict, and promotes hatred and even violence.

5. *Question authority*

When authoritarianism is present, it is inevitable that there will be efforts to prevent speech that is at odds with the power structure of the group or state, and that self-censorship will follow. But rather than address the dangers to democracy of lockstep thinking on the right and left, judgment and lamentations can become barriers and even substitutes for action. I see as an example of this the numerous and repetitive articles reporting on the "coddling" of college students who were disturbed about micro-aggressions or requested trigger warnings before topics that might cause pain were discussed. Trivializing, and even excoriating, students and others who are trying to express themselves has furthered divisions by age, political perspectives, race, gender and more.

Is it really an assault on our academic freedom to honor the request to use gender-neutral pronouns, or seek trigger warnings? Well before the controversy around the latter term, I, and I'm sure many of you reading this, anticipated that some students would find certain material difficult. It seems to me that hearing concerns and exploring ways to respond to them is an academic responsibility, not a burden. Moreover, the excessive attention to this topic not only diverts us from the more serious issues of the failure of university communities to honor and engage in dialogue and discussion, but is actually an example of the silencing of speech that the authors of these pieces intend to address.

Instead of despairing about the willingness with which some are yielding to those who want to make decisions in their names, we can take tangible actions in our daily lives to oppose this. The massive January women's march was followed up with recommendations, from postcard campaigns to the formation of "huddles," small face-to-face groups that have formed to consider and carry out activist strategies. We have created one such group within the Brandeis Women's Studies Research Center where I am affiliated, which demonstrates that, despite justified discouragement about so many issues, there are ample opportunities for creating change through citizen action.

6. *Speak to the joys of being a Jew, including appreciation for Israel, as it is.*

Many academics describe themselves as secular Jews, but my experience at NWSA and at the university where I spent most of my career is that nonreligious Jews welcome opportunities to celebrate Jewish culture. When I was Dean of Library Services at University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, I sent invitations to the Jewish faculty I knew (and those with Jewish-sounding names I thought *might* be Jewish) to drop by my office at Rosh Hashanah, Chanukah and Passover to share some home-baked goodies and conversation. Secular or not, many came and connected around their common identities as Jews. The gatherings led to a study group that met for several years and included discussions on Israel/Palestine that transcended the right/left categories in which members had placed one another. The small but active Center for Jewish Culture at UMass-Dartmouth continues to build alliances within and beyond the campus through programs emphasizing interpersonal exchanges. For example, recent discussions of books by Amos Oz and David Grossman challenge stereotypes of Israel and can disrupt the notion that BDS is the only effective strategy for those who want to support Palestinian rights.

Conclusion: What has worked for you?

My suggestions for action are far from complete. They are offered as an invitation to AEN members and friends to share what has worked for them in creating discussions of Israel/Palestine that can oppose BDS, express a strong commitment to academic freedom and first amendment rights, and build community among Jews and with others who share our perspectives and values.

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