

History Reveals Effectiveness of American Jewish-Generated Boycotts

A clash between anti-boycott activists and a group of Jewish studies professors, which has recently become the subject of much debate in the American Jewish community, is actually only the latest of many boycott-related controversies that have divided U.S. Jewry over the years.

The current tumult began in August, when 218 Middle Eastern studies scholars at American universities signed a petition pledging to “boycott Israeli academic institutions,” to refrain from attending conferences held at Israeli universities, and to refuse to be published in Israel-based journals.

A pro-Israel group called the AMCHA Initiative then posted a list of the 218 signatories on its website, together with a note suggesting that students “who wish to become better educated on the Middle East without subjecting themselves to anti-Israel bias ... may want to check which faculty members from their university are signatories [on the anti-Israel petition] before registering [for school],” since the faculty members’ signing of the petition indicates they are “biased against the Jewish state.”

Forty Jewish studies scholars responded with an Oct. 1 statement accusing AMCHA of trying “to stifle debate” by “launching a boycott initiative” against the 218 anti-Israel professors. AMCHA countered that it has not called for a boycott, but is merely alerting students about potentially biased professors.

A look back at history reveals that the sparring between the 40 Jewish professors and AMCHA is actually very much in line

with American Jewish tradition.

Boycotting Nazi Germany

Shortly after the rise of Adolf Hitler to power in Germany in 1933, grassroots American Jewish activists began organizing a boycott of German goods, under the aegis of the newly formed American League for the Defense of Jewish Rights. Eventually, the boycott movement was adopted and led by a mainstream organization, the American Jewish Congress (AJCongress).

Much of the picketing and other legwork was carried out by the Women's Division of the AJCongress—one of the earliest manifestations of women's activism in the Jewish community. Nazi officials noted their role with contempt. The government-controlled German press denounced its members as “women of the streets” (and Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, a leading boycott advocate, as “their pimp and procurer”). Women's Division president Louise Wise called on the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration to demand an apology from Berlin. “There are certain insults the United States cannot stand,” Congresswoman Edith N. Rogers declared on the floor of the House of Representatives.

The Nazis' rhetoric likely reflected their anxiety about the impact of the boycott. “Hitler had promised to end the depression and unemployment, and his base of popular support would diminish unless he could produce some results,” notes Prof. Melvin Urofsky, biographer of AJCongress leader Rabbi Stephen S. Wise. The boycott movement “could have serious effects on the economy, a fact the chancellor's economic advisors well knew,” Urofsky says.

But while German officials worried about the damage caused to their economy by the boycott, some American Jews worried about the damage it might cause to their status in the U.S. The American Jewish Committee (AJC) warned that “the boycott is likely to stimulate anti-Semitic activity,” because “the anti-

Semites [will] make use of the myth that the Jews exert a so-called 'world economic influence.'" AJC official Joseph Proskauer charged that the boycott "imperils the foreign relations of my country—which is America—with a government with whom we are at peace."

Some Jewish academics, too, were concerned. Solomon Grayzel, a prominent American Jewish historian, criticized the boycott movement in his remarks at the 1934 convention of the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly. He asserted that an organized boycott would make American Jews appear "uncivilized."

Grayzel's academic achievements were impressive, but his judgment was not always the best. He earned a Ph.D. as well as rabbinical ordination, taught at several colleges, and served for 27 years as editor-in-chief of the Jewish Publication Society (JPS). He was arguably one of the Jewish community's premier intellectuals. Yet in 1941, he rejected two book-length manuscripts that were submitted to JPS, one describing the Nazi concentration camps at Dachau and Buchenwald, and the other chronicling the persecution of Vienna Jewry, because he feared such reports were "terrorizing" American Jewry and "eroding the community's self-confidence."

Boycotting the British

England's post-World War II policies in Palestine generated deep resentment in the American Jewish community. The British government's backtracking on the Balfour Declaration, turning away of Jewish refugee ships such as the Exodus, and harsh crackdown on Palestine Jewry drove even the Reform movement's Central Conference of American Rabbis—which was still officially non-Zionist—to accuse the British of "Gestapo acts."

The U.S. wing of the Revisionist Zionists, known as the New Zionist Organization of America, called for a "boycott of

British goods, shipping and services.” In a full-page newspaper ad in the *New York Post*, revisionist supporters announced the establishment of a “Sons of Liberty Boycott Committee,” mimicking the similarly named groups that were created in colonial America “to boycott British goods as a means of stopping British tyranny and oppression.”

Mainstream Jewish organizations did not embrace the revisionists’ appeal for a broad boycott, but some did back a version of the tactic when the British asked the U.S. for a low-interest multi-billion dollar loan for postwar reconstruction. Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, co-chairman of the American Zionist Emergency Council (AZEC)—the coalition of all major U.S. Zionist groups—declared that in view of England’s “shocking record of broken pledges” regarding the Mandate of Palestine, the U.S. could not afford “to make a loan to a government whose pledged word seems to be worthless.”

But Silver’s AZEC co-chair, Rabbi Wise, thought otherwise. “Noisy Jewish disapproval of the loan” would make it appear as if “we [have] become Jews resident in America rather than American Jews,” Wise told a colleague. Wise’s endorsement of the loan at a congressional hearing, combined with a declaration by AJC President Joseph Proskauer that “Palestine should not be a factor in fixing the attitude most beneficial to America,” helped secure approval for the loan.

Ironically, the British themselves in 1948 instituted a boycott of all films written by Hollywood screenwriter Ben Hecht, in retaliation for Hecht’s public support of the Jewish militias in Palestine. It was not until four years later that films listing Hecht’s name in their credits were permitted to be shown in British theaters.

Boycotting Mexico

The most successful American Jewish boycott in recent times came in response to Mexico’s vote supporting the November 1975

"Zionism is racism" resolution at the United Nations. Nearly all of the 72 votes in favor came from Muslim, Communist or radical Third World regimes; that Mexico, a Western democracy, would align itself with them came as a shock.

Almost immediately, a slew of major Jewish organizations canceled their tour programs to Mexico in protest. In addition, the Mexican Travel Agents Association reported 68,000 individual cancellations at hotels in Acapulco, and another 60,000 in Mexico City, for the upcoming winter vacation season. According to the Mexico City Convention Bureau, a dozen Jewish conventions scheduled to take place in Mexico in the months ahead canceled in the first week following the U.N. vote, costing local vendors an estimated \$750,000.

Mexican officials tried to repair the damage. Foreign Minister Emilio Rabasa rushed to Israel, where he declared that Mexico did not regard Zionism as racism, that its vote had been misunderstood, and that Mexico was interested in granting landing rights to El Al. Meanwhile, Mexican president Luis Echeverria assured a visiting delegation of American Jewish leaders that Mexico "in no way identifies Zionism with racism" and that its future votes in international forums would be cast accordingly.

Just two days later, however, Mexico voted in favor of another U.N. resolution which contained a Zionism-is-racism reference. B'nai B'rith President David Blumberg said the Mexican vote was "astounding" in view of the assurances he and his colleagues had just received from Echeverria. The travel boycott would continue, he said.

Now, a division emerged among the Jewish organizations. Leaders of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations announced in January that in their view, the problems had been resolved and relations between American Jewry and Mexico should be "normalized" immediately. As a

result, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations reinstated its travel program. But B'nai B'rith's Blumberg called the Conference's announcement "unwarranted" and "unfortunate," and declined to lift his organization's boycott.

Finally, in June 1976, after another meeting with Echeverria, Blumberg said he was satisfied with the Mexican leader's assurance that his country would not support any future resolutions containing Zionism-is-racism language. Just six weeks later, however, Blumberg charged that Echeverria had "reneged" on his promise by casting affirmative votes when anti-Israel resolutions recently came before the assembly of the World Health Organization and other international forums, and by withdrawing Mexico from international chess and table-tennis tournaments in Israel. It was not until well into 1977, following additional Mexican assurances and a Mexican abstention on a U.N. resolution about Israel and South Africa, that B'nai B'rith and the AJCongress finally resumed their travel to Mexico.

The 1940s activists who called boycotting "an American institution" had a point, beyond the fact that boycotts were used in colonial-era protests. American democracy is predicated on the principle of individual freedom of choice. A citizen disgusted by the Nazi regime or British policy in Palestine or Mexico's endorsement of Zionism-is-racism had every right, as an American, to refrain from giving money to those governments.

When campus enrollment deadlines approach, college students—and their parents—have to make choices about spending their money. Regardless of all the sparring, protests and petitions, in the end they will have to decide for themselves whether they care if a course on the Middle East is taught by a professor who harbors strong antipathy for Israel.

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