

## **BDS: We Must Remember and Not Forget**

*Shabbat Zachor 5776*

March 18, 2016

Rabbi Barry Block

Tonight we observe *Shabbat Zachor*, the Sabbath of Remembrance, which immediately precedes Purim. I know: We celebrated Purim here last Sunday and last night. Purim is next week, during Spring Break, a rare quirk of the Jewish calendar. Since Purim isn't a Holy Day of rest, this Reform congregation is flexible about the exact day of observance. Tonight, though, we observe *Shabbat Zachor* on the prescribed date, with its critical message for contemporary American Jews.

This week's Torah portion is *Vayyikra*, the beginning of the Book of Leviticus. Marilyn, though, read from Deuteronomy tonight, an additional passage designated for *Shabbat Zachor*. We are commanded, *Zachor!* "Remember" Amalek and his treachery, attacking the Israelites from the rear – shooting them in the back, as it were – at their weakest moment during their desert wanderings. Lest we miss the message, the reading concludes, *Lo Tishkach!* "Do not forget!"

You may rightly wonder what Amalek has to do with Purim. The Haftarah, which we will examine during Torah Study tomorrow, recounts God's instruction to King Saul, hundreds of years after the desert sojourn. Saul is to destroy the Amalekites completely, but does not. Then, centuries later, the evil Haman arises in the Book of Esther, intent on killing every single Jew. Haman is descended from Agag, an Amalekite king. In other words, if Saul had heeded God's command to destroy every last Amalekite, the Jews would never have faced the threat of genocide in Persia. Later, rabbis would teach that other tormentors of the Jewish people – Torquemada and Hitler, to name the two most notorious – were also descended from Amalek.

The teaching is clear: When ignore our enemies at our peril.

In this second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a new form of virulent anti-Semitism has blossomed in the United States and abroad. I speak of the global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign – BDS, for short – which aims to destroy the very idea of the Jewish State. On the college campus, anti-Zionism is merely a veneer, behind which lurks the menace of anti-Semitism.

A year ago, Rachel Beyda, a student at UCLA who happens to be Jewish, was nominated to serve on that school's student judicial board. Earlier, the student council that considered Beyda's nomination, had debated and adopted support for BDS. The *New York Times* reported that, during what would best be described as Beyda's confirmation hearing, "Fabienne Roth, a member of the Undergraduate Students Association Council, [asked,] 'Given that you are a Jewish student and very active in the Jewish community, how do you see yourself being able to maintain an unbiased view?'"

As you can see, BDS quickly morphs into bald-faced anti-Semitism, with a person's character questioned on the basis of her Jewish identity. The Council initially declined to confirm Ms. Beyda's nomination to the judicial board, changing course only when a faculty advisor belatedly intervened.

This conversation is not about whether Israel should more ardently pursue a two-state solution with the Palestinian people. It should. It's not about whether Israel lives up to the ideals articulated in its own Declaration of Independence, that every citizen of the State should be accorded full equality. It doesn't, at least not consistently. And the debate is not about whether these issues should be debated robustly. They should.

In the words of Rabbi Evan Goodman, who leads Hillel, the campus Jewish organization at the University of California, Santa Barbara, "Jewish students recognize that Israel is not perfect. No country is. At a university, of all places, there must be space for political discourse and analysis. . . . However, when the one Jewish state in the world is obsessively singled out for condemnation and deligitimization, followed by calls for its destruction, Jewish students recognize that their personal identity is being called into question."

In the summer of 2014, at its biennial General Assembly, the Presbyterian Church (USA) resolved to divest itself of holdings in three companies because of the way their products are used in Israel and particularly in its Occupied Territories, joining the BDS movement.

You will recall that our friend, Rev. Steve Hancock, Senior Pastor of Second Presbyterian Church, came to speak comforting words to us from our *bimah* late that summer. Rev. Hancock told us how he understood the action of the

Presbyterian Church – and, more importantly for us, why he would have opposed it if he had been a delegate to the Assembly. Our bond with Rev. Hancock and Second Presbyterian Church remains very much intact.

However, predictions that the divestment action would lead to more stridently anti-Israel activity may prove sadly accurate. Jewish Federation of North America's Israel Action Network reports that, this summer, "[t]he PCUSA will debate a paper that opens the door for the denomination [to] support arrangements other than a 2-state solution, placing sole blame for the conflict on Israel, giving no substantial responsibility to Palestinians for anti-Israel terror and rejection. An official stance moving away from support for two states paves a dangerous next step towards normalizing anti-Zionism. Allies in the church are prepared to rally support for two states as the only viable and internationally-accepted strategy for peace, however they need our help."

In other words, BDS leads to a rejection of Israel's right to exist. We do not need to be reminded of the peril at which our people lived, and too often died, in the millennia when Israel was not under Jewish sovereignty.

Therefore, later this spring, when Arkansas' Presbyterian delegates are named, I will be seeking them out, for lunch and conversation, hoping to build upon the strong bonds built by our predecessors, lay and rabbinic, over several generations. I will be asking them to continue supporting a Jewish State of Israel, even as together we advocate for a better future for the Palestinian people.

The United Methodist Church, which is much larger than the Presbyterian Church (USA), doesn't gather as frequently, and has never joined the BDS movement. Four and eight years ago, Methodists considered divestment such as that adopted by the Presbyterians two summers ago. Those initiatives failed overwhelmingly at successive Methodist General Conferences. I was most actively involved in 2008, when a friend from San Antonio was chairing the committee that considered the divestment resolution. I then developed and maintain a close and meaningful relationship with Ethan Felson, who leads North American Jewry's anti-BDS activism, heading the Israel Action Network at Jewish Federations of North America. I have registered as Ethan's Arkansas "agent." We enjoy deep and meaningful relationships with United Methodists here: Only because of spring break do we not have a Methodist Confirmation class at Congregation B'nai Israel

tonight for a tour with Dale Ronnel or Emily Lewis and for our service. I am confident that, whatever the national Church decides, Arkansas Methodists will side with Rev. Hancock and our friends at Second Presbyterian Church, against BDS and against anti-Semitism.

The effects of BDS are many and pernicious. To cite a recent Central Conference of American Rabbis Resolution, which I had a hand in crafting as Chair of the Resolutions Committee:

“Rather than bringing Israeli Jews closer together with Palestinians, both Muslim and Christian, BDS further divides us all. At a time when interactions between Israeli Jews and Palestinians are already scarce, economic, academic and cultural boycotts further lower prospects for coexistence. . . .While exercising their own freedom of speech, BDS proponents deny that same freedom to others through academic and cultural boycotts.” Some scholars refuse to present papers at Israeli universities or to invite Israeli professors to their own campuses, even professors with whom they agree on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Artists are threatened with boycott if they perform or exhibit in Israel. Every Israeli, including Israeli Arabs, indeed every citizen of the planet, is harmed when the free flow of art and ideas is threatened.

A decade or two ago, we might have thought we lived in a world where anti-Semitism was a scourge of the past, or limited only to a few troubled regions, far away from American shores. In 2016, we must identify BDS as anti-Semitism. Let us remain vigilant, identifying BDS wherever it rears its ugly head, and let us fight it with every fiber of our being. Purveyors of BDS are today’s Amalek, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Haman, seeking to deny life and liberty to the Jewish people. Let us remember, and never forget.

Amen.