

TO BOYCOTT ISRAEL...OR NOT?

Naomi Klein and Rabbi Arthur Waskow debate whether divestment will bring peace to the Middle East

BY JOEL BLEIFUSS



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At the height of the war in Gaza, author Naomi Klein endorsed the campaign known as Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS). A coalition of Palestinian groups founded the BDS movement on July 9, 2005, as a way for the international community to put pressure

on Israel to reach a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians.

In her syndicated column, Klein wrote, "It's time. Long past time. The best strategy to end the increasingly bloody occupation is for Israel to become the target of

the kind of global movement that put an end to apartheid in South Africa."

Klein, author of the best selling books, *The Shock Doctrine* and *No Logo*, has taken heat for her position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "Israel is always

more emotionally difficult for me," she told *New Voices*, a national Jewish student magazine, "I think mainly it's because of the force of the reaction and the closeness [of the] reaction. It's not a stranger that is upset about [what I write], it's people in my family who write me long letters saying, 'Oh, I hate you!'"

Similar strong feelings are on display at Hampshire College, which has been debating whether it should divest from companies that do business in Israel. Hampshire's Students for Justice in Palestine wants its college to divest from companies like Caterpillar, General Electric, Motorola and United Technologies. In



LUBOB SCHLOSS, (R) ED KASHI

Rabbi Arthur Waskow and Naomi Klein differ on the best approach to peace.

response, Harvard Law School Professor Alan Dershowitz has threatened to lead a divestment campaign against Hampshire College if the administration gives in to the students' demands.

Is BDS the right response? Rabbi Arthur Waskow, a contributing editor of *Ramparts* and a former fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies, says that the BDS campaign will not work. He maintains that significant differences exist between the political situation in apartheid-era South Africa and present-day Israel.

In 1969, Waskow began campaigning for a two-state peace settlement between Israel and Palestine. He is co-author of *The Tent of Abraham: Stories of Hope and Peace for Jews, Christians, and Muslims*. Currently, he is the director of the Shalom Center, a Philadelphia-based organization that he describes as "a prophetic voice in Jewish, multi-religious, and American life that brings Jewish and other spiritual thought and practice to bear on seeking peace, pursuing justice, healing the earth, and celebrating community."

Recently, Klein and Waskow spoke with *In These Times* about the efficacy of the BDS strategy.

Naomi, won't your BDS proposal simply strengthen the position of Israeli nationalists, who will then be able to turn to moderates and say, "We are under attack!"

NAOMI KLEIN: The hard right seems to be strengthening all on its own, if we judge by the results of the recent Israeli elections.

But I've noticed a change within Israel. I got quite a few e-mails from Israelis saying, "I've always opposed this, but I feel that it is the only option left." I think that's a reflection of the feeling of desperation among progressive Israelis who are watching their country move hard right and seeing the level of violence increase exponentially.

Arthur, you were an anti-apartheid activist who supported a BDS approach to South Africa. Are there similarities between the Bantustans, the small areas of South Africa that were under "independent" black rule, and the Occupied Territories?

RABBI ARTHUR WASKOW: There are similarities, but the BDS approach is not the way to bring about the change that is absolutely necessary.

The most important, and probably the

only effective, change that can be brought about is a serious change in the behavior of the U.S. government. That means we need to engage in serious organizing within the United States.

Naomi has written about the failure of carrots in changing the way Israel has behaved so far, and I agree. One carrot the Israeli government has essentially ignored, with the help of the Bush administration, is the offer of the Arab League, led by a surprisingly creative King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. It outlines a general peace treaty between Israel and all the Arab states, on the condition of a peace treaty being negotiated between Israel and a viable, sensible Palestinian state with perhaps some variations on the 1967 boundaries.

But the Israeli government of the last 10 years has been totally uninterested because it thought it could get away with de facto annexing more and more land of the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

If the U.S. government had said, "Here's the deal: the Arab League proposal is what we are after, and we will offer carrots and we will offer sticks, whatever is necessary to bring this about." Then there would be very serious change, both within the Palestinian territories and Israel.

Real political change within the United States could come through an Abrahamic Alliance, an alliance between big chunks—though, of course, not all—of the Jewish community, the Muslim community, and the Christians.

Boycotts and divestment are not going to do it. I understand that they express a kind of personal purity—"not with my money you don't"—but they won't change U.S. policy, which is exactly what needs to be changed.

NK: It is not a question of personal purity. It's a question of basic solidarity. A call for this tactic has come from coalitions of Palestinian groups representing a very wide spectrum of political parties, labor unions and community groups.

Interestingly, the country which has responded the most seriously to the BDS movement is South Africa, precisely because the parallels are seen most clearly in South Africa.

A lot of this criticism of the BDS movement has been: Why Israel? Why not Sri

Lanka? And the point is that, according to basic left principles of solidarity, the tactics should be chosen by the oppressed communities themselves.

In terms of the ultimate solution and what that should be, BDS and Arthur's calls for an Abrahamic Alliance are not incompatible goals. I think that really what we're talking about is how you build pressure toward a resolution.

AW: But Naomi, something different is going on inside Israeli Jewish and Israeli Palestinian society than what was going on within white South Africa. Leaving aside the fact that in Israel, about a fifth of the population with some voting power is Israeli Palestinians, within Jewish Israel there is a real internal split.

Even though during the last election Israelis moved to the hard right, a serious body of people is still working for a two-state solution. And the only force in the world that can deliver that is the United States government.

You're right that many Palestinians have called for divestment, etc., but I disagree that the oppressed automatically get to decide their own tactics. For example, Hamas made a terrible ethical and practical political mistake by responding to the embargo and blockade on Gaza with rocket attacks on civilians in Israel.

I recognize that there had to be resis-

tance, but there were nonviolent alternatives. There were beginning to be "ship-ins," in the model of sit-ins. Small boats that had been certified as not carrying any weapons, began to cross the Mediterranean carrying medicine and food, especially baby food, to civilians in Gaza. The first couple got through, but then beginning with the massive attack on Gaza, the Israeli navy forced others back.

NK: They rammed one and may have fired shots at another.

AW: Yes. Now, the question is, what would have happened if the Palestinian leadership, including Hamas, had said to Europeans and to Americans, "We welcome this vigorous, assertive, non-violent resistance to the blockade. We beg for doctors and peaceniks and academics and everybody under the sun to start joining in and bringing these boats, and we appeal for pastors and priests and rabbis and imams to start coming in these boats." In fact, there was a mass public welcome of the first boats that got through.

But Hamas did not choose that response. Rather they shot rockets into civilian neighborhoods, which is both ineffective and unethical.

NK: Let me clarify. I don't believe any oppressed community deserves blind support for its tactics. But it's precisely because

there has been so much blanket criticism of any Palestinian armed resistance that I think there is an added responsibility to respect calls for nonviolent solidarity actions like BDS, which are the most effective tactics in the nonviolent arsenal.

AW: But the question is, "What will work?" And when you say what the tactics could be, I agree that sanctions are a thousand times better than shooting rockets at civilian neighborhoods, but they don't work. The nonviolent tactic of the ship-ins was direct, visible, and could've become a massive event. It would've been as direct a challenge to the blockade as the sit-ins in the restaurants were to American segregation.

The sit-ins in the American South were extraordinary because people didn't say, "Pass a new law to end segregation." They said, "We ourselves are going to end segregation. We imagine the future without segregation, we're going to do it, and then you all are going to have to decide what to do with us. Kill us or change the law." So that was extraordinarily effective. For me, the question is, "How do you create that kind of change?"

The Presbyterians and a few other Protestant groups broached the question of divestment from Caterpillar, which was producing the bulldozers that were knocking down Palestinian houses. I told the Presbyterians, "This is a waste of time. What would work would be if you all decided that every Presbyterian Church in America was going to bring an Israeli and a Palestinian at the same time to lay out the Geneva Initiative for a two-state peace treaty and the Presbyterian Church was going to commit itself to lobbying for that with the Congress and the president." That would've been incredibly effective, and still would be, if the churches and some Jews and some Muslims got together on this.

NK: I think those are wonderfully complementary strategies. This problem is going to take everything we've got. And that's why I'm so resistant to taking such powerful tactics as BDS off the table at such a crucial moment. The U.S. government was hardly a world leader when it came to sanctions against South Africa. But when universities and municipalities joined the sanctions movement, it even-



On Jan. 22, Zenat Abdallah Al-Samoni, 35, sits on the rubble of her destroyed home in Gaza City, while her son Nour looks on. She lost her husband and 4-year-old child during the recent Israeli attacks.

ABID KATIB/GETTY IMAGES

tually forced the federal government to get with the program.

I support the BDS strategy for Israel because it will work again, and it will work because it cuts to the heart of something that is so important to so many Israelis. And that is the idea of normalcy, the idea that Israel is really an honorary adjunct to North America and Europe—even though it happens to be located in the Middle East.

At the moment, it is possible to lead a very comfortable, very secure, very cosmopolitan life in most parts of Israel—despite the fact that Israel is at war with neighbors. I don't think Israel has a right to simultaneously rain bombs and missiles on Gaza, to attack Lebanon in 2006, to massively expand the settlements, and also have this state of normalcy within its borders. For justice to come, the status quo will have to first become uncomfortable.

When concerts are canceled in Tel Aviv, when tourists don't come to Israel, then, I believe, many Israelis will start putting pressure on their political leaders to finally negotiate a lasting peace. So I don't buy the argument that they'll just feel isolated and become more right wing. The threat of isolation can be a very powerful tool for progressive change in a country like Israel.

Naomi, Helen Suzman, a white South African who was a leader of the anti-apartheid movement, who died this past Jan-

uary, argued that economic sanctions against South Africa during apartheid had hurt the entire population, particularly the poor. Would not the same thing happen in the occupied territories?

NK: It is true that in South Africa it did hurt the entire population. And the call for sanctions was consciously made despite that fact. And that is why it is so extraordinary, that there has been such a widespread call from Palestinians despite the fact that they will also suffer under BDS.

But we can't compare the kind of suffering Gazans are facing under the Israeli blockade and embargo to what Israelis would suffer if a BDS campaign were to get off the ground. We're talking about people in Gaza lacking life-saving medicine, cooking oil and food, versus Israel losing some foreign investment, and not having concerts and some academic conferences. These are not in the same league.

AW: Naomi, you said you see them as complementary strategies, but in the real world, people have to decide what to put their energies into. Do we think that if the Presbyterian church is trying to put its energies into boycotts this time, not just of Caterpillar but of all Israeli society, that that's going to be workable alongside of, and at the same time as, mobilizing Israeli and Palestinian voices simultaneously in those churches, and then those

churches lobbying Congress on these solutions? I don't believe it.

NK: That is what happened with South Africa. The BDS strategy personalizes the dispute. You follow the money at your own school, your own shopping habits, your own government, and extraordinarily lively debates ensue that are not just about the boycott strategy but are about why the boycott is happening. That's happening right now at Hampshire College.

The boycott starts the debate, it brings teeth to it so you're not just signing yet another statement that can be ignored. Or bringing together like-minded people to listen to another speaker or dialogue.

And that's the dynamic that BDS promises. Just as in South Africa, where you had a lot of industry saying to the apartheid regime, "We can't live with this any longer," we would have that dynamic within Israel.

AW: But there is a huge difference between South Africa and Israel. In South Africa, the U.S. government was not pouring billions of dollars into the country. Whereas, in the case of Israel, the U.S. government is. That support seems to me to be far more the point.

The likelihood of Israelis saying, "Wait a minute, this is a serious problem," is going to be much greater if the Obama administration says: "Here's the deal. There's going to be an emergency peace conference in the Middle East. It's going to come out with a Palestinian state that's really independent, not chopped up in little bits, and there will be a peace treaty with all the Arab states." I can see the possibility of a whole new American outlook making peace in the Middle East.

NK: Once again, the question is how do we get to the point where the Obama administration feels the need to get tough and say, "Here's the deal." I don't believe that mere dialogue will bring us there. I'm arguing that BDS is a fantastic movement-building tool precisely because it is a conversation starter; it ignites the debate. It makes the conflict personal in the same way as the amazing grassroots movement we had in the '80s against South Africa did in the United States. It is only once those debates are raging that there will be the kind of bottom-up pres-



Left-wing Israelis and Israeli Arabs call for an immediate end to the war in Gaza as they demonstrate Jan. 17, in Tel Aviv.

DAVID SILVERMAN/GETTY IMAGES

sure on Obama that could lead to a real shift in U.S. policy.

AW: Yes, there needs to be a real life, day-by-day connection to making change happen. But from my point of view, if you could bring Muslims and Jews and Christians together, meeting each other, talking to each other, getting past the fear and stereotypes about each other, if you could get that happening, that would be a piece

You can't do now what was done in the 1970s to the first American Jewish organization to talk about a two-state solution, Breira, which got killed by attacks from the center as well as the right wing of Jewish institutional life. That's not working this time.

NK: While I understand that the Jewish community is finding voices that are more diverse, we have to be clear that this is not

all carrots all the time, and introducing any sticks at all would represent real progress. Also I think BDS does embody the future, because it says that Palestinian lives matter deeply. There is such an asymmetry of outrage on this issue—the uproar about Israeli universities facing a boycott at the same time as Palestinian schools and universities are being bombed, for instance. When

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of the future the way the sit-ins were a piece of the future.

The way to build the movement in the United States is for the people who are here to build a movement among themselves. A big chunk of the unrepresented Jewish population in the United States—somewhere between half and two-thirds of it—agree that there needs to be a two-state solution. Their institutions either don't agree or won't do much about it.

Arthur, during the war on Gaza, J Street, which is a new "pro-peace, pro-Israel" group, posted an editorial on its website stating, "We recognize that neither Israelis nor Palestinians have a monopoly on right or wrong."

In response, Noah Pollack, on the *Commentary* magazine blog, wrote, "It is time that thinking people start calling J Street what it actually is: an anti-Israeli group." What is it about Israeli politics that makes it so difficult to discuss?

AW: Well of course *Commentary* would say that. But it's not difficult to discuss. In fact, J Street has gone right on and continued speaking out.

Much more to the point, and much more upsetting, was that Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, wrote an op-ed in the *Forward* condemning J Street, saying that J Street's "words are deeply distressing because they are morally deficient, profoundly out of touch with Jewish sentiment and also appallingly naive." He represents, in theory, a million Jews. But it didn't kill J Street.

just a Jewish issue. And maybe it shouldn't even be Jews who lead this issue. In Europe, it isn't just Jews who are leading this issue.

AW: Well, the other difference between Europe and the United States is that in Europe, the Jewish community, for reasons of history 75 years ago, doesn't have much political clout. In the United States, the Jewish community does. So changing the Jewish community, building progressive organizations is both possible and necessary in the American Jewish community.

I don't attack BDS as unethical. I'm saying it won't work. But there is one major ethical defect to it, I think, which is that it doesn't embody the future in the present. The future it does not embody is the one most precious and most legitimate for Israel: peace with all the Arab states.

I agree that a policy of all carrots for Israel and all sticks for the Palestinians is both an ethical and practical disaster. But sticks-only for Israel won't and shouldn't work, and that's what the BDS approach feels like. Sometimes that works anyway—it did in South Africa. But it hasn't worked (and shouldn't) when used against Palestine—what stronger BDS could there be than the one against Gaza?—and it hasn't worked (and shouldn't be used) against Cuba.

In the United States around civil rights, it was embodying the future in the present that worked. What will and should work now is that One Big Carrot of peace, with sticks right behind it if an Israeli government rejects the carrot.

NK: First of all, Israel has received

we treat Israeli war crimes as deserving of international sanction, we are rejecting this double standard and embodying the future we want, which is a future of genuine equality.

AW: But what would have happened if Hampshire College had twinned itself with the university in Gaza and a university in Ramallah and had done its best to make real-life connections?

NK: Frankly, not as much as what is going to come of their bold BDS stance. At Hampshire College, there have been plenty of exchanges and dialogues of all kinds, but those don't change the economic and political dynamics of the conflict, which are what need changing.

AW: I agree that that is what needs changing, but I don't think this is the way to do it. I don't think we're going to agree on which set of tactics are best, but I guess people are going to have to make up their own minds. I do think we have to recognize that nothing is going to happen unless the policy of the United States changes.

NK: I agree with that. We just have a disagreement about how we get there. I think BDS changes the dynamic, because it inserts multiple other economic powers into the equation. It would put grassroots pressure on the Obama administration that could become hard to ignore. And also pressure within Israel. I certainly agree that it will piss off Israelis, but I also think we need to acknowledge that ignoring the call is an active position toward Palestinians, it's not a passive one. ■

Do-It-Yourself Governance

Without new social movements, there will be no new New Deal

BY ELIZABETH SANDERS

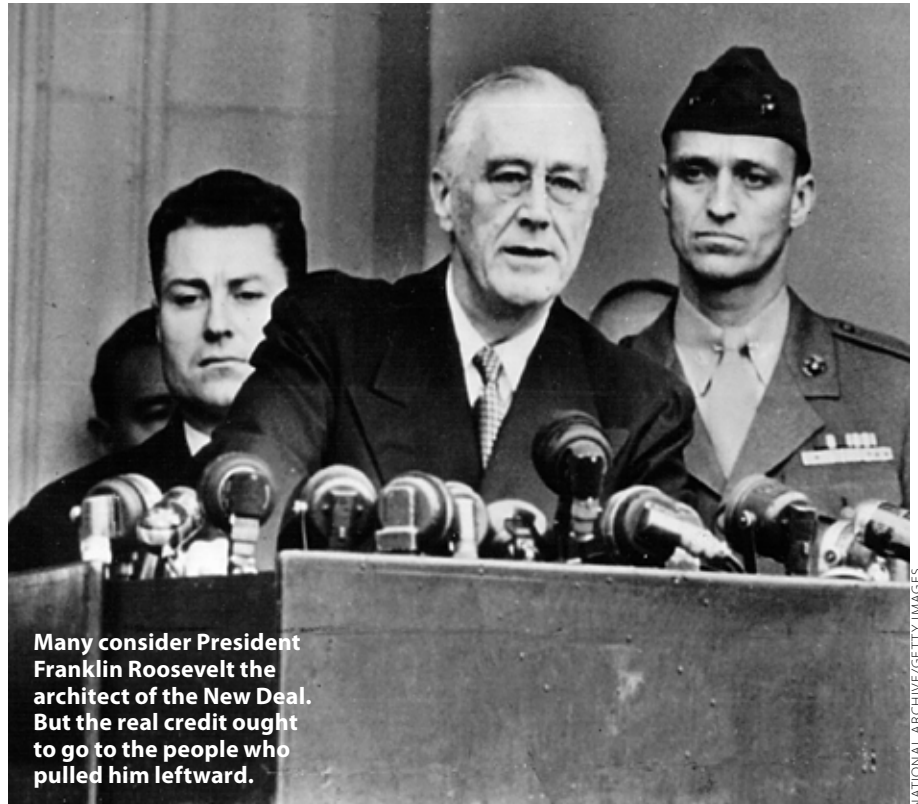
WHEN BARACK OBAMA BEGAN to run for his party's nomination two years ago, he could not have seen himself as the next Franklin Roosevelt, the founder of a new Democratic "regime" (to use Yale political science professor Stephen Skowronek's term). More likely, Obama anticipated that, should he ultimately win the presidency, he would be what Skowronek labels a "pre-emptive" president, one who manages to be elected when his party does not dominate political philosophy or policy expectations, or have a sure place in the voters' hearts.

Recall that despite George W. Bush's dismal approval ratings, Obama and Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) were running neck and neck in the polls from mid-August through early September. Without the financial crisis, Obama may not have been assured electoral victory, much less a definitive Democratic sweep.

If Obama perceived his presidency as a Clintonian "pre-emption"—another round of triangulating that meant accepting the essential premises of the Reagan Revolution, assumed to still be strong despite the previous administration's abject failures—that would explain the ambiguity of his campaign appeals to "hope" and "change," minus a clear repudiation of Republicanism.

Obama seemed intent on reassuring the public that he was *not* a liberal Democrat, not a partisan of Rooseveltian regulation, taxation and big government. Even after his electoral victory, the reassurance game continued. The transition team and designated economic advisers represented a spectrum from former Clinton officials rightward.

His grassroots supporters grimaced as



Many consider President Franklin Roosevelt the architect of the New Deal. But the real credit ought to go to the people who pulled him leftward.

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architects of financial deregulation—including the many protégés of former Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin (and Rubin himself), and the *bête noire* of President Carter's defeat, former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker—were designated as Obama's economic advisers. No economists like Joseph Stiglitz, Paul Krugman or Robert Reich grace the administration's economic team. Furthermore, the administration chose a military officer and a Republican defense secretary to run its foreign policy, with Secretary of State Hilary Clinton hardly a dove herself.

The realm of realignment?

In 1933, Roosevelt's break with the old regime seemed more sure and sharp. He

did not bring the laissez-faire enthusiasts who created the Wall Street debacle onto a stage full of flags as a symbol of his commitment not to rock the boat. Roosevelt's "Brain Trust" was made up of college professors, not Wall Street operatives. Roosevelt was not shy about using the tax code as a mechanism for redistribution of wealth.

Six weeks into his presidency, however, Obama appears to be warming to the Roosevelt role. A new regime "reconstructor" (in Skowronek's theory of presidential challenge and limitation) enjoys an unusual window of opportunity. The old regime is discredited. Clearly its policies, philosophy and institutions have failed disastrously. The