

Boycott & Hanukah

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Captain Charles Cunningham Boycott was a protestant land agent in Ireland in the second half of the eighteenth century. The British rulers imposed harsh conditions on the Irish and were hated for it. In 1880, the Irish Land League initiated a protest when Captain Boycott tried to evict poor tenants. They withdrew workers from his lands and refused to serve him in local stores. This was why his name gave us the word we now use when someone refuses services or support to an individual, business or country. To boycott. It didn't work because other workers were willing to step into the gap. It would be many years before the Irish gained Home Rule. But it inspired the Swadeshi movement in India amongst many other attempts at non-violent opposition. That boycott didn't work either.

Boycotts rarely have the desired effects. At most, they can make the person who applies a boycott, feel self-righteous. I have boycotted. In the fifties, I boycotted Germany and its products because I believed that most Nazis were rehabilitated into the infrastructure and senior positions in Germany after the war. No one I knew would have been seen dead in a Mercedes or a Volkswagens (Hitler's people's car) in the years after the Second World War. But then when Israel received these cars as part of the reparations settlement in the 1950s, it seemed ridiculous, if every other Israeli taxi was a Mercedes, to refuse to buy or travel in one!

Then I boycotted South Africa for its Apartheid policies. But other than making us feel virtuous, it had little effect. The Apartheid regime began to collapse for other reasons; the Mozambique and Angola wars, the collapse of the Soviet Union and a crisis of confidence and conscience within. Similarly, with the boycott of Southern Rhodesia when Mr Smith declared Unilateral Independence. I went on to boycott Chinese goods over its invasion of Tibet. I boycotted Turkey over its invasion of Cyprus. I even joined a Tamil boycott against the Sinhalese.

The Arab League initiated a boycott of Israel after the Arab Israel Wars of 1948 with the support of all the Arab and Muslim world. But it had negligible effect. Neither did violence if it came to that. And now I boycott any organization or person or business that picks on Israel to boycott. Since they choose to ignore all the other far more egregious mass murdering countries and those who have occupied territories around the world. I know it hasn't and won't change anything, but it makes me feel I am doing my part. And clearly AIRBNB, pathetically bowing to pressure, doesn't realize it either. That is why we accuse them of prejudice as well as cowardice for picking on settlers in the West Bank. And I for one will never use them. Boycotts are weak tools. But they do flush out the hypocrites.

One of the reasons for the existence of the BDS movement and its spread is that Israel is portrayed by the left as the proxy for the USA and as an imperialist, colonial invasion of the Middle East. Which is precisely why

Hanukah is the best answer to the BDS.

There is much debate both in religious and academic circles about the origin of Hanukah. The earliest sources we have are the two "Books of The Maccabees" which were written in Hebrew around the Second Century BCE. They were not included in the Jewish Biblical canon. The rabbis were no fans of the Maccabees. But these books were preserved in Greek translations as part of the Septuagint, the translation of the Tanach into Greek. They record, the well-known revolt of the Judeans in 167-160 BCE against the Syrian Greeks and their ruler Antiochus after they desecrated the Temple. The guerrilla campaign led to the Greeks withdrawing and the rededication of the Temple. The eight-day ceremonies imitated King Solomon's dedication of the First Temple, as described in the Biblical books of Kings and Chronicles. The Festival of Lights came much later. Under Roman Occupation the rabbinic authorities were a peace party and reluctant to celebrate a military victory. Instead, they turned Hanukah into a spiritual festivity celebrating Jewish survival as a miracle, and proof of Divine intervention.

What is clear from Greek, Roman and Jewish texts of two thousand years ago, long before Islam and the Quran emerged, is that the Judean people and their State flourished and was at various stages and under various leaders, autonomous and religiously vibrant. The Dead Sea Scrolls all attest to a complex but lively religious world based on the biblical texts and how they were interpreted differently by competing groups and sects. I recommend a recent publication "Discovering Second Temple Literature: The Scriptures and stories that shaped Early Judaism" by Malka Simkovich. I am not sure I agree with the sub-title, but the book is an excellent introduction to the richness and variety of Jewish texts long before competing religions tried to replace Judaism.

It is utter ignorance (and anti-Jewish propaganda) to think that the Jews and Judaism had no connection with the Land of Israel before the rise of Jewish Nationalism, Zionism, in the Nineteenth Century. You might just as well say there was no such thing as an Arab before the rise of Arab Nationalism. And if Imperialism is defined by conquering someone else's territory then Islam is much more of an Imperialist and Colonialist. The only difference between Jewish settlement and Arab settlement in Israel is that the overwhelming majority of Israeli leaders have agreed that Palestinians have rights to a homeland too, and are happy to have Arabs living amongst them, whereas the PLO and Hamas are not. The reason why boycotting will not undermine Israel is precisely because the Jews are not an interloping, alien invasion who will be threatened. Most Israelis regard Israel as their homeland, not a colony. And for thousands of years, they kept on coming back whenever political or economic conditions allowed. The large wave of immigration that came in the nineteenth century was, in its way, no different to the mass immigration that revived Safed in the sixteenth century after the expulsions from Iberia. Certainly, with just as strong a case as Arab migrations to places where there were employment and prospects.

Hanukah is the sequel to the Exodus. The assertion of the Israelite self-identity and with its land. Hanukah is the continuum of Jewish survival despite our own self-inflicted tendency to ruin what we have built. Hanukah

is our original celebration of independence, of our preserving our traditions and rights to our homeland. The apparent miracle of the oil lasting eight days is a fanciful postscript to offer us the alternative to violence. The assertion of positive values in preference to fighting. But if it is claimed that we have no such rights, then whether it is the Greeks, the Romans, the Christians the Muslims of the Socialist Left, we have no alternative but to emulate the Maccabees and fight.

Happy Hanukah everyone!