Comment on Steven Rose's opinion article, 'Academic freedom in Israel and Palestine'

Every issue has two sides, while Steven Rose's article highlights only one. I am certain many readers will recall that, several years ago, suicide bombings in the main streets of Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and other Israeli cities were fairly frequent. These atrocities are now a thing of the past, mainly owing to security measures taken by the Israeli government. Roadblocks, which are among these measures, on occasion allow passage only to older men and to women, as these populations have been shown to be significantly less involved in terror attacks than younger males. While some attacks on Israelis have been carried out by women or older males, occasional travel restrictions of this type strike some sort of manageable balance between the Israelis' right to live and the Palestinians' right to freedom of movement. One can choose to agree or to disagree with this policy, but it is misleading to present it as an arbitrary measure and to ignore the reasons behind it.

Most, if not all, of Rose's examples can be countered one by one in a similar manner—by considering the other side of the issue and by realizing that Palestinian terror also affects the academic freedom of Israeli scientists. Rose's comment that some Israeli academics do not support views such as his own might indicate that they have a distinct viewpoint—that of people living at the epicentre of the conflict, who see large and small events as they occur first-hand and without the distortion that distance and second-hand reporting can introduce.

On the more general subject of academic boycotts: a number of years ago I served as the Secretary of the Israel Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (ISBMB), the Israeli representative to the Federation of European Biochemical Societies (FEBS) and the International Union of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (IUBMB). During this time, Iran applied to join the IUBMB as an observer; this was during one of the periods in which

the Iranian President launched his daily tirades against Israel's right to exist, denied the Holocaust and made repeated statements that left no doubt about his intentions for Israel's future, academic freedom and all. In the time-honoured tradition that separates science from politics, the ISBMB officers decided upon hearing of the Iranian application that we would support Iran's candidacy if its scientific presentation at the then upcoming IUBMB

meeting (Kyoto, 2006) was up to standard. The presentation was indeed professional and we voted in favour of the scientists of Iran, a country whose leaders openly call for the destruction of our country. Surely the Western world can follow suit, keep politics and science separated, and take the issue of using academic boycotts as a political tool off the table once and for all?

Ari Elson is Associate Professor at the Weizmann Institute of Science, Rehovot, Israel.

E-mail: ari.elson@weizmann.ac.il

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It takes two to tango

In the last decade, calls for an academic boycott against Israel emerged, initiated by the British University and College Union (Rose & Rose, 2002). Unexpectedly, this anti-Israel 'movement' chose to target Israeli academia and scientific organizations, rather than legislative bodies. Surprisingly, the impetus originated within the European academia, founded on the pillars of the universality of science, which foremost seeks to promote '*scientia*' ('knowledge') and freedom of communication. Why, then, do those who call for a boycott of Israeli science mix academia and politics? This would be akin to a situation in which universities were accepting students based on their political views. Besides the latter, need we remind the boycotters that such actions are forbidden by the International Council for Science (Blakemore, 2003)?

Owing to the academic affiliation of the boycott, it may appear as a matter of academic freedom, yet it is hard to disregard the subtle insinuations and impartiality. Is the anti-Israeli wolf dressed in academic sheep's skin? If not, why is it that we see unilateral critique of Israel while, in fact, the political situation in the Middle East involves Israelis and Palestinians? If the motives of the boycotters were sincerely addressing human rights violations, why don't we equally see boycott calls pursuing Palestinian

researchers because the Palestinian Authority hasn't done enough to prevent suicide bombers? How can the boycotters disregard an intertwined history of more than 60 years between these two nations? Alas, why is the boycott call so meticulously synchronized with controversial political events? Hard to explain is the impeccable coincidence of the launch of the first boycott call with Israel's military campaign (Operation Defensive Shield) in response to an increasing number of suicide attacks by Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other terrorist organizations. Although the role of Palestinians cannot be denied, those who call for boycotts against Israel seem to overlook this fact. Doesn't it take two to tango?

Regardless of the true nature of these boycotters, they have not achieved much and thousands of scholars and various Nobel Prize laureates have spoken out against an academic boycott (Beck, 2008). Why, then, is it that Israeli academia is facing yet another boycott call (Rose, 2009)? Once again, it is impossible to ignore the timing coinciding with the controversial Goldstone report about alleged war crimes during the incursion into Gaza.

We must also consider how the Arab minority in Israel would suffer from boycotting the only institutions that promote equal access to education and research. How would the 8.8% of all university students in Israel that are Arab and the 7.8% of the

first-degree diploma students that are Arab, benefit from the boycott? Why boycott the only institutions that consistently employ between four and eight Arab professors each year (about 1.2% of all academia members; Al-Haj, 2002)? Only recently, Professor Majid Al-Haj was appointed Vice President and Dean of Research at Haifa University. During 2005, the Israeli Open University granted first-level university degrees to about 100 Palestinian prisoners, who are in Israeli prisons. Unlike in South Africa, Arab and Israeli students share the same dormitories, classrooms and hospital beds; Israeli academic institutions are considered to be the biggest 'melting-pot' in Israel.

Cases where Palestinian students and professors were denied entry into Israeli territory are constantly used as facts to justify a boycott against Israel. However, we need to bear in mind that in the face of the threat of terrorism, it is necessary to ensure the security of Israeli citizens from suicide bombers, who come in all sizes and shapes—from women to children and even students (Israel Security Agency, 2009). Nonetheless, Palestinian students who have begun to study at Israeli universities have been permitted to complete their studies in these institutes (Traubmann, 2006).

We need to look at the situation from a different angle without spiralling into a full-scale political debate. The boycotters try to convince the reader that their view leads to only one conclusion. However, observations are prone to different interpretations. One interpretation of the recent war in Gaza is that only Israel violated human rights; however, Colonel Richard Kemp, a decorated former Commander in the British Forces, provides a different interpretation (Kemp, 2009). In his article, Kemp claims that Hamas fighters discarded their uniform once the fighting began and used women and children as suicide attackers, which is clearly a violation of human rights. This example already undermines the boycotters' certainty in their conclusion. Another example of wrongful interpretation is seen by simply reading the title of Steven Rose's column that mentions a country (Palestine) that ceased to exist on 14 May 1948.

The 'so-called' academic boycott claims to target Israeli academia in order to change Israeli policies, yet it targets the wrong body and intentionally targets Israel alone. Boycotts seem to fall short of their initial aim (Jacobs, 2009). Enticing call-outs only feed the extremists. Boycott

promotes alienation and impedes communication, which is the opposite of what academia stands for. Scientists and scholars are primarily teachers, who should teach and not preach. We should leave the political campaigns to politicians, while they leave the teaching to us.

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Shai Berlin is at the Department of Physiology and Pharmacology, Sackler School of Medicine, Tel Aviv University, Israel.

E-mail: shaiberlin@gmail.com

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Response by Steven Rose

Neither Shai Berlin nor Ari Elson attempt to refute the facts in my Opinion column, nor show any concern for the routinely abrogated academic freedom of their colleagues in the Palestinian universities in Gaza or the West Bank. Instead, they argue that issues of human rights and politics should not intrude within the walls of academia. Yet, politics intrude inevitably into their letters. Berlin suggests that the boycott campaign is an anti-Israel conspiracy—even though the boycott would apply to Israeli academic institutions but not to Israeli citizens working elsewhere. Nor, despite Berlin's claim, is the boycott call timed to relate to Israel's Gaza massacres or the Goldstone report; rather, it is part of a growing global movement, from civil society, churches and academia, for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions.

Elson justifies roadblocks as a measure to prevent suicide bombing of civilians, acts of terror that I join him in condemning. But he implies that these roadblocks are within Israel itself, that is, behind the 1967 borders. In fact, hundreds of such blockades straddle roads within the West Bank, closing Palestinian cities, preventing farmers reaching their lands, the sick from health care, and staff and students access to their schools and universities. The West Bank is also criss-crossed with 'Jews only' settler roads on which Palestinians may not travel. The illegal Jewish settlers—400,000 of them—drain the aquifers for their swimming pools and leave hundreds of thousands of Palestinians without access to running water, as documented by Amnesty International. It may take two to tango, as Berlin states, but the tango involves two

evenly matched partners. Israelis should not be surprised to discover that the asymmetry of illegal military occupation, expropriation and poverty breeds resistance.

Berlin writes from Tel Aviv University (TAU), which has participated in 55 joint technological projects with the Israeli army over recent years, mainly in electro-optics (Keller, 2009). TAU's campus occupies the site of a demolished Palestinian village, Sheikh Muwanis, whose inhabitants were forcibly evicted in 1948. His staff club, the Green House, was once that of a Palestinian village elder. Berlin claims, in flat contradiction to the United Nations and international opinion, that since 1948, Palestine as a country "does not exist". Is this denial a neutral scientific claim, or an endorsement of a political agenda?

Berlin points to the presence of 'Arab Israeli' students in Israeli universities. Twenty per cent of Israeli citizens are Palestinian, but only 1% of Israeli academic staff is Palestinian. Berlin fails to mention the discriminatory legislation that gives special benefits and credits to students from the Israeli Defence Force, which excludes Palestinian citizens of Israel. He says nothing of the many well-documented examples of racist harassment by professors and Jewish students of Palestinian students on the campuses of Haifa and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, or of Haifa University's endorsement of a conference—from which Palestinian Israelis were excluded—focusing on the 'demographic problem' of the high birth rate of Palestinian Israelis and the problems this would present for the Jewish State. Think about how this would sound if a