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?

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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