

## Let's honour Israel by calling out irrational hatred



**Gil Troy**

As Israel celebrates its 68th birthday, too many enemies still regret its birth, and desire its death. The fight against Israel all too often transcends rational discussion about historical facts or current events. Israel-bashing has become an industry and an identity.

On campus, Israeli Apartheid Weeks and boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) resolutions pop up regularly and repeatedly, no matter how few students might be interested. A loud minority pushes this anti-Israel crusade fanatically. And despite the anti-Israel movement's many failures on campuses, more and more outsiders speak about "campuses" as being not just anti-Israel, but anti-Semitic.

Modern anti-Zionism is anti-Semitic because of its disproportionate targeting of one country, Israel, the only Jewish

state. Modern anti-Zionism is anti-Semitic because its anti-Israel hysteria echoes traditional anti-Jewish hysteria, with extreme accusations about Jewish power, Jewish evil and innocent, Jesus-like Palestinian victims, with their suffering exaggerated and any responsibility Palestinians might have for the conflict excused. And, less abstractly, modern anti-Zionism is anti-Semitic because when campuses erupt with Israeli Apartheid Weeks and BDS fights, the bullying, demonization, and slander often bubbles over into harassment of Jews on campus – and even occasional violence.

It's easy to despair amid this irrational, seemingly unstoppable hatred. But Israel's triumphal story teaches that individuals can change history. Zionism launched a revolution against far more lethal forms of Jew hatred and far more paralyzing forms of Jewish despondency.

To honour this Israel Independence Day, Jews and non-Jews, especially on campus, should stand up and say "enough." At minimum, students, professors and alumni should start signing letters and petitions denouncing the anti-Israel obsession on campus and championing academic

freedom.

This year at McGill University, anti-Israel boycott forces launched a third attempt in 18 months to pass a pro-BDS resolution. After the motion passed in student council, but failed an online ratification vote, McGill principal Suzanne Fortier took a stand. Defending "academic freedom, equity, inclusiveness and the exchange of views and ideas in responsible, open discourse," she issued a statement affirming "the core principles of McGill" and reminding everyone that McGill's "mission" remains "to advance learning and create and disseminate knowledge by offering the best possible education, by carrying out research and scholarly activities judged to be excellent by the highest international standards, and by providing service to society."

Unfortunately, 43 professors denounced Fortier's support of academic freedom. Surprisingly – because McGill's faculty tends to be apolitical – 158 professors then responded with our own letter supporting the principal's "courageous stance." The letter proclaimed: "Boycotts and intellectual bullying have no place at McGill or at any other institution of higher learning," noting

that "in its disproportionate focus on Israel, in its founding declaration, and in many statements by key members of the movement, the BDS movement tries to squelch speech and intimidate those who support Israel's right to exist."

The letter, which I proudly signed and helped circulate, also addressed our students' distress, saying: "We fail when our students don't feel genuinely safe in our university – and the BDS movement has made McGill students feel unsafe, unsupported and unwelcome in their and our academic home."

The only documents so many McGill professors have likely signed simultaneously are tax returns and grading sheets. They have shown colleagues throughout North America what to do. Don't wait for a BDS resolution or a pro-BDS statement from others. This month, celebrate Israel's independence by championing academic freedom. Let's see professors, students, and alumni, left and right, issuing broad denunciations of boycotts and academic bullying. This is not for Israel's sake – Israel will survive. This is a test of our values, our universities, our integrity and our souls. ■

## Phoning home from Jerusalem, then and now



**Sara Horowitz**

A colleague returning from a sabbatical in Jerusalem waxed enthusiastic about phone service in Israel. Everyone, he said, had at least one cellphone, and most homes had Internet phone lines, all at a fraction of Canadian rates. Israel, he said, is phone heaven, and we're light years behind.

You might say the advances in phone technology and phoning habits are one measure of changing economic and social practices, national character and ideas of community. Some phone memories give a sense of that evolution.

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When I was a student in Jerusalem, decades before the advent of mobile technology, hardly anyone had landlines. Rates were impossibly

high, and wait times for installation were two to three years. Social habits reflected the absence of phones. It was common to pop in to visit people without warning. North America students made "phone dates" to speak to parents thousands of miles away – a specific time we'd wait by a designated public phone, or they'd wait for us to place a call from the post office. Long distance conversations were hurried and breathless.

Public phones required an *asimon*, a special token roughly the size of a Canadian nickel, shaped like a flat doughnut, with a hole in the centre. The longer the conversation, the more *asimonim* needed. Many Israeli students knew how to tie a thread through the hole, to hold onto the *asimon* as it slid down the coin chute. That way, the token wouldn't fully drop, but would register as new as time passed, so that even the lengthiest call would cost only one *asimon*. The truly adept could tug on the thread just as they replaced the receiver and retrieve the *asimon* for future calls.

My husband remembers queuing at the only working public phone at his Hebrew University dorm while another student made call after endless call. Finally, the other student finished and deftly yanked the thread to reclaim his token, but his timing was a shade off, and he lost it. Furious, he kicked the phone and broke it.

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Several weeks before my husband and I were married, a ringing phone woke me up in the middle of the night. It was Bilal, a merchant whose tiny shop in the Jerusalem's Old City held a dazzling array of stunning fabrics. A Jerusalem friend and colleague had introduced me to Bilal and his wares years earlier, and between rounds of mint tea and Turkish coffee and conversations about family, many of his fabrics found their way to my home in North America.

For our wedding, my husband and I decided on a chupah made of fabric from Jerusalem. I asked my friend to purchase the fabric on my behalf and send it to me. But as it turned out, my emissary and the merchant couldn't

agree on the fabric. Hence, the call, on a newly installed, crackly phone, at 3 a.m. (my time). She described her choice, he described his. With today's technology, I would be able to see both fabrics. But we had no such options then, only their descriptions of the colours, patterns and sheen of the two fabrics.

They hung up, and I waited for my "surprise purchase" to arrive. In time for the wedding, I received a package containing two bolts of fabric – one, a wedding gift from my friend and the other a wedding gift from Bilal.

I sometimes think back on that late-night call and to the lines of community drawing together an Israeli Jewish ethnographer of Yiddish culture, an Israeli Palestinian fabric merchant and a sleepy-eyed Jewish woman in faraway *galut*.

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I'm not nostalgic for the technologies of yesteryear. The rapid changes in Israeli phone culture are less precious to me than the tightness of social networks that operate without, through or despite technology. ■