

Let's talk about Nini ...

Internationally known, award-winning Israeli singer and songwriter Achinoam Nini – who has served in the Israel Defence Forces, who has been a goodwill ambassador for Israel and who has been honored for her peace work – has been invited to headline the Vancouver Jewish community's Yom Ha'atzmaut celebrations this year. Apparently, this is a controversial choice for some in our community. (See story on page 6.)

Nini (widely known as Noa) is clear about her political views and, so far, her critics have come up with the following to explain their upset at her invitation. She hates – a strong word, but it applies in this case from what we've read – Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. She rejected an award from one artists organization and resigned from another because they honored someone she thought was too right-wing. She may have written in a since-deleted Facebook post that she supported B'Tselem, Breaking the Silence and New Israel Fund for their work supporting peace. In 2012, she expressed hope that Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas could help bring peace to the region. Also in 2012, she took part in an alternative Remembrance Day event organized by Combatants for Peace, which describes itself as "a group of Palestinians and Israelis who have taken an active part in the cycle of violence in our region: Israeli soldiers serving in the IDF and Palestinians as combatants fighting to free their country, Palestine, from the Israeli occupation." The ceremony mourned Palestinians and Israelis who had been killed in the conflict.

One of her critics has compiled a curious mix of her posts to supposedly show why she is an inappropriate choice to perform, including: "We believe in two states for two peoples, Israel and Palestine, living side by side, supporting, protecting and nurturing each other.... We believe in three simple steps: recognize each other, apologize to each other and share the little we have." We, too, believe in two states for two peoples, and in reconciliation.

With plenty of Vancouverites apparently scouring the internet for "evidence" against her, there may be more to come. Nini's political views are not above criticism. Nobody's are. But she stands behind her opinions, acts on her beliefs, and is very clear about who she supports – some people might be surprised that B'Tselem and Breaking the Silence are not among those listed on her website as groups she endorses – and who she doesn't support. Unlike some of her local critics, who are hiding behind the anonymity of social media and don't put their names and reputations behind their opinions, Nini owns her views. Whether or not you agree with her, that's worth respect.

Should we be inviting someone

with whom we don't all agree to headline our Yom Ha'atzmaut ceremonies? What about someone who criticizes the Israeli government?

We who love and support Israel understand that holding a large community-wide celebration once a year feels good and offers a sense of solidarity. But what kind of Jewish community is it that doesn't brook differences in opinion? Such uniformity certainly does not reflect one of Israel's – and Judaism's – greatest attributes and secrets to continuity: openness to debate and discussion.

Skipping over what Judaism says about character assassination, the harm that can be done with words, the fact that lashon hara is worse than theft because money can be repaid but the destruction of a person's reputation can never be completely mended, is there a line that shouldn't be crossed when making out a Yom Ha'atzmaut invitation list?

As we argued in this space last week, it is our view that boycott, divestment and sanction (BDS) is a movement steeped in racism (though not everyone who supports BDS is an antisemite, of course). Rightly, Canada, the United Kingdom and other democratic countries formally condemn BDS. If we were to draw a red line not to be crossed, support for BDS might qualify as a deciding factor in whether or not to bring an artist to perform at a Yom Ha'atzmaut – or any – event. It also might not.

Despite what the emails in your inbox might say, Nini has explicitly said that she is against BDS. At most, she might associate with groups that might have supporters that also support BDS – groups that are legal in Israel and part of the vital discourse there.

In a democracy, all voices that don't incite hatred against an identifiable group are to be, if not welcomed, at least tolerated. This includes those who believe that Nini should not sing for Vancouverites on Yom Ha'atzmaut this year. However, the right to speak is not predicated on being right. This applies to Nini as well as her detractors.

Some people are demanding that the invitation for Nini to perform at our Yom Ha'atzmaut celebrations be rescinded. If successful, it won't matter much to Israel's future, or to Nini's. We should not overinflate our self-importance. But such an act – a boycott of Nini – would certainly affect our community's future. It would be a signal of intolerance, of closed-mindedness and an unwillingness to brook the very presence of a Jew, an Israeli, a veteran of the IDF and a great singer, simply because some disagree with her politics – and, worse, that we rely on innuendo and rumor to make our decisions. How solid a foundation is that upon which to build our community? What lesson would that teach our children? This is what we talk about when we talk about Achinoam Nini. ■

The real purpose of BDS

SILVANA GOLDEMBERG

While the three stated goals of the boycott, divestment and sanction (BDS) movement are an end to Israel's "occupation" of "Arab lands occupied in June 1967," equal rights for Arab Israelis and the right of return for Palestinian refugees (bdsmovement.net), its real aim is the destruction of Israel. As BDS activist Norman Finkelstein succinctly explained in a 2012 video, the ultimate result if the BDS's three goals are achieved is: "There's no Israel. That's what it's really about." And, indeed, Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas has said, "I will not accept a Jewish state." (youtube.com/watch?v=5OYMOcTBRsw)

In a Jan. 19, 2016, interview Fatah Central Committee member Tawfiq Al-Tirawi said: "a Palestinian state in the 1967 borders [i.e. limited to the West Bank and Gaza], with Jerusalem as its capital, is just a phase." While initially suggesting giving Jews plane tickets to leave the region, he says, "I want to live together with them" in "Palestine, in its historical borders, and we want all the Palestinian refugees [to] return to their country." (memritv.org/clip/en/5275.htm) Omar Barghouti, a BDS leader who apparently studied at Tel Aviv University for a time, acknowledged during a University of Ottawa talk in 2009, "if the refugees were to return, you cannot have a two-state solution like one Palestinian commentator remarked, you will have a Palestinian state next to a Palestinian state rather than a Palestinian state next to Israel."

There are many other myths perpetuated by the BDS movement and its supporters, which point to it being antisemitism disguised as anti-Zionism, the denial of the right of Jewish people to live in peace and security in their own homeland. Examples follow.

BDS supporters talk about boycotting products from the Israeli "invasion of Palestine." Jews did not invade nor did they steal the land. Thousands of Jews were already living in the region before the state of Israel was established, and Jews used to call themselves Palestinians. Jews are indigenous to Israel. Jerusalem was the capital of the Jews. Even during the British Mandate, banknotes, coins and stamps had the initials of Eretz Israel (Land of Israel). And the Jews who immigrated to Palestine, as Israel was then called, as a reaction to the ethnic cleansing and genocide they suffered in European and Muslim countries, bought their properties, as returning Jews had been doing for decades.

The Arab Palestinians rejected the United Nations partition of the land (77% for Arab Palestinians and 23% for Jewish Palestinians) in November 1947, and have yet to establish their own state. After the War of Independence, it was not Israel but Jordan and Egypt that occupied illegally Cisjordan (Judea and Samaria, or the West Bank) and Gaza, respectively.

Abbas, Barghouti and others also have accused Israel of genocide. Israel has done no such thing. While its military has been forced to act against terrorism, it has not set out to deliberately wipe out an entire people. The Palestinian population is growing, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. At the same time, 1.7 million Arabs make up 20% of the Israeli population.

The charge of apartheid is another false accusation. As Dr. Kenneth Meshoe, South African politician, president of the African Christian Democratic Party, aptly put it: "Israel apartheid is a lie." Every Israeli citizen has rights and freedoms. All minorities in Israel, including Arabs, can study in universities, are allowed to become professionals, businesspeople, athletes, work in public sector jobs and hold seats in the Knesset. In the current Parliament, Arab Israelis occupy 14 seats. As an anecdote, the sentence of Israel's Supreme Court of former prime minister Ehud Olmert was read by an Arab Israeli judge, Justice Salim Joubran. Could that happen in an "apartheid" country?

Another issue BDSers protest is that of Israel's

blockade on Gaza, despite that it is legal, according to international law and the San Remo Manual, given that "relations between Israel and Hamas (which has ruled the Gaza Strip since 2007) are in the nature of armed conflict." What would be illegal is if Israel let only some boats seeking to break the blockade pass, as a blockade must apply to every ship unless special permission is given. For more on this, see the article by Prof. Ruth Lapidoth (jcpa.org/article/the-legal-basis-of-israel's-naval-blockade-of-gaza).

The blockade is needed to prevent terrorist groups from getting more weapons. Hamas' charter specifically states their will to destroy Israel. More than 15,000 missiles in the past 15 years have been launched from Gaza at innocent Israeli civilians, leaving in their wake deaths, injuries and billions of dollars in damages, in addition to three wars and continued missile and rocket fire at Israel, combined with ongoing incitement against Israel and Jews on Palestinian TV and in schools and training camps.

The security fence – yet another mark against Israel in BDSers' views – is also a legal method of self-defence. While it is not ideal and while some of it (less than 10%) is an imposing concrete wall as opposed to a wire fence, it reduced terrorist attacks by 90% in its first many years. While terrorist attacks have since increased, there are still fewer than before, and the barrier is a part of the reason for the decline.

As to the BDSers' demand for the right of return. "The Palestinian demand for the 'right of return' is totally unrealistic and would have to be solved by means of financial compensation and resettlement in Arab countries," Egypt's then-president Hosni Mubarak noted in 1989. As Barghouti correctly observed, if Israel were to absorb the more than six million Palestinian Arab refugees, Israel as a Jewish and democratic state would disappear.

Refugees, as defined by the UN Relief and Works Agency, are "persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict" – which began when Arab countries attacked the newly forming state of Israel – and their descendants. Approximately 750,000 Palestinians fled or left Israel by choice because of that conflict, and more left after the 1967 Six Day War, which was also the result of Arab aggression.

As former Canadian justice minister Irwin Cotler wrote in a 2014 *Times of Israel* blog and has spoken and written about elsewhere, there is another aspect that must be considered when speaking of the rights of refugees: "the pain and plight of 850,000 Jews uprooted and displaced from Arab countries – the forced yet 'forgotten exodus,' as it has been called – has been expunged and eclipsed from both the Middle East peace and justice agenda for 67 years."

Another question more people need to ask of BDS supporters is about the lack of protest when Egypt considers building a wall on her border with Gaza, blockades Gaza, destroys neighborhoods adjacent to her border with Gaza to create a buffer zone and destroys tunnels used for arms smuggling, kidnapping of civilians and soldiers and infiltration for attacks.

If BDSers really were concerned about Palestinians, they would be protesting the treatment by the Palestinian Authority and Hamas of their own people, the lack of basic human rights and freedoms that people living in the West Bank and Gaza possess. But they're not. Instead, they focus their sights on Israel, their ultimate goal its destruction. ■

Silvana Goldemberg is an award-winning author of more than 20 books and magazines published in Spanish and English throughout the Americas. Originally from Argentina, she is currently based in Richmond.