



Letter to the AAA from the Israeli Anthropological Association*

August 28, 2014

The Israeli Anthropological Association (IAA) and its members believe that the AAA's possible endorsement of boycotting Israeli academic institutions is a moral insult to our integrity, to the integrity of AAA members as individuals and as anthropologists, and to the integrity of the AAA as an institution. Academic boycotts cut against the grain of the academic enterprise and the free exchange of ideas. Such a resolution would be a slippery slope undermining the very principles upon which the AAA and anthropology are built. The association has made political statements in the past, but boycotting a country and its universities is unprecedented. Some resolutions were passed against American states, like the refusal to hold annual meetings there, but such boycotts did not extend to academic institutions affiliated with those states. Punishing scholars in Israel for the acts of their government is not only meaningless, ineffectual and counterproductive, it is first and foremost a breach of academic freedom and freedom of speech.

No less important, the call for considering a boycott of Israeli institutions is misleading – to the point of dishonesty – in providing an apologetic attempt to separate Israeli institutions from individual anthropologists. Almost all Israeli anthropologists are employed in institutions that are funded by the state. Despite claims to the contrary and despite explanations that a boycott is merely a symbolic/political act against Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, a boycott would stigmatize and cause concrete harm to these individuals whatever their political opinions. These consequences and the underlying currents of the boycott need to be brought to the light of day, not camouflaged with legalistic distinctions. Nor should they be disguised with polite phrasings. A boycott will turn the AAA into a hostile environment for these individuals, some of whom have been members of the AAA for years.

Boycotting Israeli anthropologists does not make moral sense. Israeli anthropologists – like others around the world – are not accountable for their governments' decisions. The academic boycott movement (e.g., as expressed in the recent ASA debate) claims that Israeli academics are “furnishing the ideological justification and technical means for the...Occupation to continue.” This serious misreading of Israeli academia reveals a true disconnect from knowledge of the situation on the ground, a kind of armchair anthropology that doesn't resonate with our discipline. If American and other anthropologists are concerned about a political reality far from their shores, why not contact some "locals" – among who are many members of the AAA – to learn more about the situation? They might be surprised to learn about the range of activities and research projects in which we are involved and about our opinions regarding boycotting academia. Israeli universities and scholars are in fact the source of much vocal criticism, research, and public efforts to change the local political reality. Most Israeli anthropologists oppose Israel's occupation of Palestinian land since the 1967 war, and support Israel's withdrawal and a two-state solution. They consistently criticize their government's short-sightedness in negotiating with the Palestinians and for restricting the participation of Palestinian

academics in the academic enterprise. Many have been activists for the rights of Palestinians – Israeli citizens and in the territories – for years. But Israeli anthropologists also grasp complexity. Many don't accept the political ramifications of viewing Israel as solely responsible for our predicament. Nor do they believe Israelis can single-handedly achieve a much aspired-for peace in an entangled geopolitical context just because it is their moral ideal. Many are also critical of the role of Palestinian and Arab leaders. All deplore the loss of human life that is one consequence of the absence of a viable solution to the ongoing conflict.

An on-line search of 'Israel' in the upcoming AAA meeting program yields significantly more items than any other country in the Middle East! As asked in several replies to the initial AN announcement we also wonder: Why has Israel/Palestine become the AAA's central concern and the target of a possible boycott? It is hardly necessary to produce a litany of places around the world where people suffer harshly because of conflict and unequal power, or where past exploitation, slavery, or even genocide still reverberate. So, again, why select Israel?

Aside from the moral questions, what would a boycott do? In an email exchange among Israeli anthropologists, one suggested that Israeli academics might use the threat of a boycott to push the current Israeli government toward compromise with the Palestinian leadership. This may be one goal of a potential AAA boycott, the logic being such: We (Americans) boycott Israeli academic institutions expecting that this will bring the current Israeli government to change course. If this were likely to be the chain of events, perhaps many Israeli anthropologists might themselves support a boycott. In reality, however, such a step is unlikely to end this conflict. A boycott, we argue, is politically speculative, unwise, and destructive. It would play into the hands of those within and outside Israel who wish to perpetuate and even exacerbate the current situation. A boycott will do nothing on the political level and, if anything, would weaken an important source of liberal thought in Israel. Indeed, as we write, many academics are engaged in a struggle against those forces within Israeli society that seek to erode universities as a vital meeting place for the exchange of critical ideas.

The format of the debate over a possible boycott is also important. Most concretely we wish to call attention to how the engagement with a possible academic boycott of Israeli universities has been structured in the forthcoming AAA annual meeting. The initial AN announcement states that the aim is "exploring how to make dialogue work," and promises "a space for presentation of multiple perspectives." There is little evidence, however, that such a balance has been achieved. Most sessions that deal with the topic – several are Invited Sessions on Wednesday and Thursday – stress the plight and disappointment of Palestinians leading to a *raison d'être* for a boycott. The "Member's Forum" (Thursday) purports to be an "open forum," but implements restricted rules of communication. Thus, "Names of members who wish to speak will be selected at random", and those members will have two minutes (!) "at the mic". Surveying the program clearly suggests that organizational procedures have been seized upon to "give the mic" to selected participants who favor a boycott initiative, and to minimize participation of anthropologists knowledgeable about or affiliated with Israeli universities. While dialogue is the declared aim of this

program, the line-up of only one session critiquing the idea of boycott, with four-five sessions providing a basis for supporting it – and with no communication between the opposing presenters – constitutes more of a stage for expressing pre-conceived one-sided positions than providing "roundtable" discussions for give-and take. Rather than allowing for a "focused conversation in which opposing views can be expressed and complexities can be acknowledged and understood," these arrangements block communication, and they certainly fail to form a viable democratic process or a serious academic conversation.

Academia is one of the few arenas in which meaningful exchange can take place, and anthropology is one of the unique enterprises through which the taken for granted can be challenged and rethought. In adopting a boycott, however, the AAA would be rendering impossible any discussion, exchange of views, dialogue, informal meetings, and opportunities for scholarly cooperation across a political divide. Castigating Israeli anthropologists in no way will be an influence for change, peace, or justice. Instead of boycotts and blunt divisive moves that create discriminatory lines of distinction between morally-stigmatized and morally-sanitized members, we urge the AAA to continue to provide a safe, democratic and creative meeting place: a haven in which a diverse array of scholars may freely present their questions, ethnographies and views, and learn – bottom-up – about the complex socio-political realities of allies and adversaries in Palestine/Israel. Together we should seek new ways to facilitate and deepen a constructive dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis.

* This letter is from Harvey E. Goldberg, current president of the Israeli Anthropological Association (IAA) and Professor Emeritus at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Founded in 1973, in recent years the IAA is the home of about 100 members (more than a dozen are also AAA members). The IAA sponsors a yearly meeting in which throughout the years many anthropologists from abroad have participated. MA and PhD degrees in Anthropology are awarded by five Israeli universities, and BA-level anthropology courses are offered in them and in local colleges. In a vote concerning the present letter, an overwhelming majority of the IAA members supported it.