



American Jewish Committee



American Jewish Congress



Anti-Defamation League



B'nai B'rith International



Jewish Council for Public Affairs



Hadassah



Jewish Labor Committee



Jewish Reconstructionist Federation



Jewish War Veterans



National Council of Jewish Women



Union for Reform Judaism



United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism

June 6, 2006

Dear Commissioners and Advisors to the 217th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA):

Since your last General Assembly in 2004, representatives of the Jewish Community have been actively involved with your church concerning the use of 'phased, selective divestment' as a means of addressing the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. These past two years have seen an animated debate on this critical issue. In fact, many of the overtures that have been submitted to the 217th General Assembly concern divestment. Several encourage rescinding this policy, others seek a change to positive investment in peace and confidence-building projects, and some call for implementation of the spirit of the overture presented at your last assembly. As you prepare to represent yourselves, your presbyteries, your synods and your church, we would like to reiterate our concerns. We pray that you will understand the importance of this issue to the Jewish community, and appreciate that we have faith in our ongoing dialogue. Our hope is that the church avoids a position that will harm our ongoing relations, harm the very people you hope to protect, and harm the prospects for a peaceful two-state solution for the Palestinian and Israeli peoples.

We want to speak specifically to why we feel divestment and economic actions focused on Israel are wrong. We do so in the spirit of candid, respectful, and direct dialogue, which we agree must be a hallmark of our conversations - on even the most contentious issues.

We begin with what binds us: Our Scriptures reveal that God created all of us in the divine image -- human dignity and equality is a core value of Jewish and Christian traditions. We are all made less when the value of human life is cheapened in any way. Further, our traditions call upon us to be peacemakers. In Hebrew, the word *Shalom* doesn't just mean "peace" but wholeness and completeness. Peace comes about by our labors to complete the work of creation. We must work towards the day when every human is granted the dignity, security, and beneficence that is the promise of the created universe.

Any place in which a single human being suffers, we should suffer. There is suffering enough in the land cherished by us all. We are deeply committed to the welfare and security of the Jewish people, both in the State of Israel and around the world. But let us make clear from the outset that the plight of Palestinians is also in the forefront of our minds. And we know that unless there is peace and security for the Palestinians, there can be no peace and security for Israelis and Jews. We know that the Christian concern for the Palestinian people, many of whom are your Christian sisters and brothers, comes from a deep commitment to the alleviation of human suffering. Our common goal is the realization of a just and lasting peace, to end suffering and to restore dignity and security to all in the Holy Land. We must marshal our efforts together to bring this peace about.

The path toward that peace has been complicated in the past year. While Israelis supported a party committed to building on the historic withdrawal from Gaza and parts of the West Bank, Palestinians elected a party that rejects compromise and endorses terrorism as a means to its goal, the eradication of Israel. We recognize that there have been disagreements and there has been intransigence, at times, on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides. However, we do not accept that there is any moral equivalence between those who initiate terrorism and those who take defensive actions to stop it, between those who intentionally attack innocent civilians and those who, in attacking terrorists hiding in civilian areas, harm innocents.

There have been many proposals for peace through the years and, we imagine, you share our disappointment over the failure to end this conflict. While the past is not the blueprint for the future, we want you to understand that history and the events of the past are a critical part of our memory and influence the ways we imagine strategy and outcomes for the future. The past, as we understand it, is worth reiterating here. In 1948, the nascent Israeli state accepted a two state solution, which was rejected by Arab leadership. For nineteen years, Israel was isolated and boycotted; there were constant attacks against Israel. All this preceded the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967.

Even after 1967, when Israel offered to return land, the Arab League unanimously passed the three “No’s,” denying Israel’s right to exist and opposing any negotiations. The Palestinian National Council endorsed the policy calling for Israel’s destruction. This memory is compounded by countless statements by Arab and other leaders, before 1967 and since, calling for the total annihilation of the Jewish State. The recent statements from Iran’s President are a continuation of this ongoing threat. The newly installed Palestinian Authority’s Hamas-led government has yet to remove its rejection of Israel’s right to exist and its support of economic and armed attacks on Israelis. Meanwhile, successive governments of the State of Israel have accepted in principle a two-state solution. The continued objective of those responsible for the current violence is the eradication of Israel. It is not unreasonable to presume that, even after a resolution of the conflict, those opposed to Israel’s existence will continue in their pursuits. You can understand why we feel that violence stands as the primary obstacle to peace. These concerns are exacerbated by the continuing anti-Semitic and anti-Israel rhetoric we hear and see, including textbooks that exclude the State of Israel, and schools and camps that inculcate negative views of Jews and too often legitimize violence.

While a negative history should not and cannot limit the imagination of what is possible, memory also helps ground us, reminding us from where we come. What is particularly sad for us is that far too often our Christian sisters and brothers, most particularly some in the mainline Protestant denominations, have remained too silent in the face of this persistent hatred, rejection, and violence aimed at Israeli men, women, and children.

The sense that we, the mainstream Jewish community and the Ecumenical Protestant community, share a deep commitment to social and economic justice, human and civil rights, and peace brings us close. We are natural allies. Our joint efforts to bring an end to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, as part of our larger commitment to end violence in the Middle East, should bring us ever closer.

We were, therefore, startled that there are those within the Ecumenical Protestant community who believe that an economic lever should be employed in a discriminatory fashion specifically against the State of Israel. We assume that this conviction is what undergirds the suggestions of the employment of a strategy of divestment and corporate action – the use of economic sanctions to advance a particular political outcome. We believe that this policy undermines peace, promotes extremism, exacerbates conflict, damages the relationship between Jews and Christians that have been nurtured for decades, and is dangerously ill-matched with our passionately shared vision of a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Instead, divestment is a bludgeon that provokes extreme responses from all sides.

1. For Jews, any policy that seems to discriminate against Jews is fraught with inescapable associations. A policy of divestment or corporate action resonates in the Jewish consciousness with historic boycotts against Jews, companies with Jewish leaders, and later Arab boycotts against Israelis and the State of Israel; they are experienced by Jews as part of a pattern of singling out Jews for attack. To determine and continue policies that knowingly tap into the deepest fears and pain of another individual or people is, in our tradition, a serious failure of relationship. Our first critique of divestment is that it polarizes people and communities so that the policy of divestment, and not peace, becomes the central issue. It provokes such a strong response in Israel and within the Jewish community that constructive Christian involvement becomes less possible. Simply put, the bitter debate over divestment drowns out the real conversation about how to end the conflict.
2. Divestment as a policy focused solely on Israel places you in concert with those who, looking at all the state violence in the world, shamefully paint only Israel as a pariah nation. We understand and respect your calling to invest in a morally responsible manner. But you also stand powerfully in opposition to prejudice and discrimination against individuals and nations. Even if it is not your intent, divestment efforts that are not universally applied but rather focused uniquely on Israel, no matter how nuanced and explained, smack of discrimination. While some formulations have been fairer in addressing both sides of this conflict in their call for the use of economic levers, these are still seriously flawed and problematic. Singling out the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the exclusion of other regions and nations, which raise far more egregious human rights abuses, still treats Israel with a double standard that is dismaying and bewildering to the Jewish community. The decision by MRTI to add criteria (allowing the identification of corporations associated with violence against Israelis) feels, to many, like form over substance. It is doubtful that all companies working with the Hamas-governed Palestinian Authority would be brought under review, leaving Israel disproportionately affected and the primary target of this process.
3. Such a process ends up being linked with the anti-Apartheid activities that once united us. In fact, the mantra of many of Israel's detractors has been to draw repeated parallels, including terminology ("apartheid fence") and strategy ("sanctions and divestment"). The purpose of the anti-Apartheid divestment strategy was to delegitimize and end the Apartheid regime. It will be impossible to disabuse most Jews, here and in Israel, and the American public that no such comparison is meant.
4. Divestment may well undermine willingness by Israelis to imagine peace. While we recognize that Israel is a nation with a powerful military, it is important to remember that terror is a weapon of great and devastating power – with lasting consequence. Decades of terror and international isolation since 1948 have left Israelis feeling threatened and isolated. Divestment, with all of its historical connotations, seriously threatens to deepen that isolation. Together and independently, Christians, Jews, and Muslims must give the parties to the conflict the confidence they need to move toward peace. For the Israelis, concessions on land, settlements, the relaxation of security and the resulting improved conditions for Palestinians will not come as the result of further isolation. History has shown that the greatest strides by the Israelis have come as the result of international support. Divestment as a policy is more likely to provoke and less likely to build trust and understanding.
5. Divestment validates and supports Palestinian intransigence by giving hope that, ultimately, the world will allow Israel to be destroyed and Palestinian extremist dreams realized. Most Israelis feel, and we agree, that much terrorism is grounded in a rejection of Israel's right to exist – one reason why attacks increased during the period following the signing of the Oslo Accords. Palestinian terrorism, before 1967 and since, has targeted schools, buses, cafes, discothèques, hotels – places where innocents, particularly children and families, congregate. We fear that terrorism may continue after the creation of a Palestinian state, especially if it appears that independence for the Palestinians came as the result of terrorism rather than negotiations. Peace will not come until, along with the return of territory, there is

a commitment on the part of the Palestinians to destroy the terrorist infrastructure, recognize Israel's right to exist, forswear violence, and commit to expressing grievances without the use of terror and other forms of violence. The primary responsibility for ending extremist terrorism rests with the Palestinian leadership. Any policy that gives Palestinian extremists hope that they can wait until Israel is weakened prolongs the agony and will exacerbate violence.

At a time when politics in general have become so divisive, here and abroad, our efforts should be aimed toward reconciliation. There are many meaningful coexistence programs that are necessary to foster a generation of Israelis and Palestinians that will work and live side-by-side – and move past the teaching of hate and the resort to violence. There are many ways to witness on behalf of Christians and all Palestinians. In fact, we believe, no witness could be more powerful than the actions of so many, including Israelis and Jews, who fight for an equitable two-state solution and the security and human rights of Palestinians and all Israeli citizens alike.

Although we may embrace different narratives that bring us to this point, we share unmistakably similar goals – two states, living side by side, in peace and security. As leaders of the Jewish and Protestant communities, we need to deepen our understandings of these different narratives. We need to develop ways to communicate our concerns and advance our shared principles. We are committed to creating opportunities to advance our shared principles and our common cause – such as educational programs and joint missions to the region, where we can endeavor to see the land as the other does – so that we can bring our joint vision to American, Israeli, Palestinian, and other leaders. Our collective voices can play an instrumental role, working with the American government and others, to help Israeli, Palestinian, and other Middle Eastern leaders to pave a path toward the cessation of violence and a resumption of negotiations. From there, we can imagine the peace that is at the core of all three of our traditions.

Divestment is a stumbling-block to all we envision collectively. Our prayer is that you permanently remove this obstacle to peace.

Sincerely,

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Ethan Felson, *Jewish Council for Public Affairs*

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