

# Free discourse central to Jewish tradition

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JUNE 20, 2015, POSTED BY LINCOLN Z. SHLENSKY



Controversy over a pro-Palestinian billboard prominently placed on the Patricia Bay Highway in May, reminds me of the ways in which my own Jewish tradition provides guidance for dealing with heated public conflicts.

The billboard, which urges a public boycott of Israeli goods as a means to “end Israel’s Apartheid and Occupation of Palestine,” is provocative.

How should we think about its aim to simplify rather than to deepen thinking, to provoke rather than to reason?

Paid for by a local activist group that evidently holds Israel solely responsible for the conflict with the Palestinians, it was met with dismay, if not anger, by many Jews in Victoria. The sponsors argue that its message recalls the South African anti-Apartheid movement and is directed solely against Israel’s treatment of Palestinians. As a Western-style liberal democracy, they believe Israel should be held to its own standards, not those of dictatorships and monarchies, when it systematically deprives Palestinians of equal rights.

Jews who reject such a boycott, (not all do), counter that Israel’s leaders have made sincere efforts to resolve the conflict, even if the current rightist government opposes a Palestinian state. Criticizing Israeli “apartheid,” they say, ignores the history of violent Palestinian attacks against Israeli Jews. They wonder whether boycotters are simply covert anti-Semites, since the solutions boycotters propose, such as resettlement of Palestinian refugees in Israel, would destroy the Jewish character of the state.

This kind of debate can continue almost endlessly, at least until a shouting match cuts it short. If you are like me, you may find yourself siding with one side’s arguments, and then with the other’s. What has any of this to do with faith?

I draw from the controversy two lessons related to Jewish religious and social values. The first is the necessity of compassion, or *rahamim*, a Hebrew word whose root is “womb,” evoking a mother’s unconditional love. The “apartheid” billboard is, I believe, counterproductive because it fails to evince any compassion at all for Israelis, who are as locked into the human tragedy of this conflict as Palestinians. Compassion, according to the first century sage Hillel, is the core Jewish virtue. It must govern how we approach disputes.

A second principle derives from the Jewish tradition of open discourse. Much of post-Biblical Judaism emerges from rabbinic debates compiled in the Talmud, signaling the immense value Jews place on interpretation rather than revelation. The lesson is that public debate must be allowed to take place free of interdictions. Whatever one’s opinion of the billboard, any attempt to suppress its message must be viewed as damaging to the values of the Jewish tradition—and, indeed, to ideals of liberal democracy we all uphold as Canadians.

Such stifling of speech has become worryingly common in recent months. The Harper government recently proposed invoking hate-crime laws to enforce its “zero tolerance” policy against initiatives to boycott Israeli goods or institutions. This is a wrong-headed approach to dealing with nonviolent speech. Regardless of the morality or strategic value of boycotts, I view banning them as tantamount to censorship. The Jewish tradition indicates that there is a much better approach: fight speech with speech. If you oppose something someone says, explain your reasoning and argue otherwise. The value of minority opinion within the Jewish tradition cannot be overstated. In theological debates, the Talmud preserves minority opinion alongside that of the majority.

Compassion and free discourse are central to the Jewish tradition. They are essential to achieving the ideal outcomes of conflict: coexistence and peace.

\* *Update:* A new billboard, with a smiley face and the words “I Love Israel,” recently appeared alongside the “Apartheid” billboard. While presenting this new message is certainly preferable to censorship, the new sign engages in more of the oversimplified rhetoric my article laments.

***Lincoln Z. Shlensky, Ph.D.***, is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Victoria. He is a founder of the newly formed Victoria-based Jewish peace group, *If Not Now, When?* <[ifnotnow.ca](http://ifnotnow.ca)>.

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\*This article was also published in the print edition of the Times Colonist on June 20 2015

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