

The New RDS Movement (Retractions and Disavowals in Scholarship): One Academic's Symbolic Pushback Against the BDS Movement

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I am very honored to be here with you today. Thanks very kindly to Charles Asher Small and all his colleagues at ISGAP.

Let me begin with a few anecdotes.

School #1: The chair of my doctoral committee at Penn State, a trusted mentor who was also the director of the art school, accuses me of breaking into the department offices at night, to meddle with another student's file. The student had a Muslim-sounding name and so I was the natural suspect. He and another professor, a big-boned Canadian woman, bring me into their offices and indeed bring me to tears with their ambush of false accusations. Turns out the secretary had misfiled a document of mine in the other student's files. They could have simply asked her first, but they let their imaginations run wild and jumped straight to the trial. I told the dean about it, but he recommended to "just let it go" and finish my studies.

This same man, my doctoral committee chair, an Armenian with a bizarre and macabre case of what I can only describe as *genocide envy*—my new term, and a rare clinical condition!—later goes on to censor another Jewish student's on-campus exhibition of pro-Israel/anti-terrorist paintings. Joining him is another distinguished professor, a very famous painter with an endowed professorship, who goes around the art school's hallways, tearing down posters for this student show. At a subsequent confrontation, he apparently yells, "Israel is a country that has no right to exist," despite having a Jewish wife and a past Israeli girlfriend. *This* incident makes the national press and the director is reprimanded. He accepts mandatory enrollment in an anger management course as a condition for his keeping his job.

School #2: At State University of New York/Old Westbury, where I was a permanent adjunct until 2013, the student association holds an Anti-Israel conference featuring a keynote speaker who is the daughter of Holocaust survivor. Exploiting a Jewish speaker and a child of survivors to legitimize the biased conference is exceptionally vile to me. I ignore it and focus on my classes. (You have to understand that I also choose not to act on *every* incident as a form of self-preservation. These kinds of things make my blood boil, as I know they do yours, and I often feel like I'm just short of an aneurism or cardiac event.) At this same school, at an end-of-year faculty appreciation dinner, I am sitting with my colleagues and the conversation turns to

summer travel. I mention I am going to Israel. The chair of the department, a French woman, looks at me with disapproval. I tell the table, “Oh yes, I am a big Zionist,” to which the French woman, my supervisor, recoils with visible disgust, with an indiscernible utterance to match, and bites her tongue. Had she not bit her tongue, it sounded like she was about to say something very un-nice. At that same dinner, another senior professor introduces me to a colleague from another department, I believe it was English. This woman looks at me squarely and says, “Wow, I didn’t realize we are still letting Israelis on campus.” I am stunned, but I cannot issue a comeback or make a scene because I am an adjunct, trying to be on my best behavior, possibly to be considered for a tenure-track position. Flash-forward to my 8th year of teaching there. Not one but *two* tenure-track positions become available in my small department, but *I* find out about it in an online ad. After 8 years of faithful teaching (and let me assure you it is not because of my performance, as I consistently get the highest student evaluations in the department), I am overlooked. So, I leave.

School #3: At a faculty meeting at Pratt (I’m really running out of schools here...), the chair of the art education department jokes with everyone present when he joyfully exclaims, “Where else can an Israeli and an Iranian get along like this?” Of course this was meant to demonstrate the fact that I am Israeli and he is Iranian, and that as chair, he is a benevolent and tolerant figure—like the king of Persia himself. Again, this is my boss who can either assign me or not assign me to future teaching. One starts to wonder: do you hide the fact that you’re from Israel to get ahead, or to simply keep your measly little adjunct job in academia? I am subsequently laid off for reasons that are still unclear.

School #4: I teach art history online for a small college in West Virginia, just about an hour outside of Washington, D.C. In the cover and safety of the online environment, a few students have taken the opportunity to do some of the usual Israel-bashing. Now these students were literally born yesterday, and I know they know nothing about the Middle East; you can tell they are regurgitating things they’ve heard somewhere. *And* it’s completely off-topic. I ask, ‘How did the Renaissance affect the later Baroque aesthetic?’ and they say, “Well, *Israel...*”

Now for some art world examples:

Incident #1: With much excitement, I visit the New Museum on the Bowery, shortly after it opens. On the third floor, there is an installation by a young artist, envisioning the year 2048, when Israel no longer exists. I am told by the didactic panel that the artist is not anti-Israel but is exploring political realities. This makes me very mad and I decide to sneak a little note into the museum installation to express my displeasure. (Illegal, yes, but I hope the artist got it.) After calming down, I go down to the lobby gift store to browse, where, on cue, I find a stack of prominently displayed DVD’s about the terrible Israeli aggression in Gaza of 2008—in the New Museum *gift store!* And mind you, this is about 20 feet away from a plaque of donors and supporters *full* of Jewish names. This irony is obviously lost on the museum, and on the gift store buyer whose salary is indirectly made possible through the generosity of these community members.

Incident #2: In the mid-90s, I sit on a College Art Association Annual Conference panel with one of the most prominent living American artists, a nice Jewish lady. Flash-forward to 2011 and we are now Facebook friends. Her wall, however, is constantly updated with anti-Israel rants, and ‘liked’ by her very large circle of art world groupies. I decide to take her on and it soon devolves into a very ugly, very public Facebook showdown—me against this art superstar with unusually vicious disciples. This kind of thing really affects your career in the art world where everyone is by default a self-righteous, politically-correct, postmodern, lefty activist. I later have to walk by her artwork as it is displayed at the Metropolitan Museum, where I am a tour guide. Oy, the humiliation.

Which leads me to Incident #3: The Metropolitan Museum. The education department is using a map of the Middle East for teaching purposes. Israel is nowhere to be found. When I’m alone in the office, I take a big, fat sharpie and write it in. That was fun! Meanwhile, at *this* gift shop, the powers that be have decided to replace the iconic Met shopping bag with one that features a variety of languages, ostensibly to ‘welcome the world.’ Arabic is *prominently* displayed on the bag, but Hebrew is nowhere to be found (in a city whose population is a quarter Jewish.) Then, one of the worst incidents in memory. The curators of the Alexander McQueen fashion design exhibit, the Met’s most successful show *ever*, decide to use the soundtrack from *Schindler’s List* for one of the fashion videos in the exhibition. The John Williams’ composition that makes us all weep, the soundtrack to a film about 6 million Jews murdered... *Really?* Unbelievable. Keep in mind that *all* of these incidents happen under the new leadership of Thomas Campbell—a brit. Can we not find a museum director in this fare land of ours of 350 million people?

And it’s not just in academia and the art world. I could go on. The Internet! As I’m sure you’ve experienced when you review the comments section on news sites, social media, etc.—you can really take the temperature of the culture, and the antisemitic and anti-Israel gauge is off the charts. The Radio! Every morning I have to listen to the BBC and now even Al Jazeera—both known anti-Israel organizations—on NPR, on *WNYC*! Do we not have our own journalists? The Papers! The New York Times, what used to be the paper of record, also taken over now by the usual suspects. I hardly ever read it anymore. The Park Slope Food co-op wants to boycott Israeli hummus. My bank (HSBC) is laundering money to terrorists! *Where the hell am I? What the hell is going on?*

I wanted to take the time to detail some these incidents and experiences, without which you may not appreciate my cumulative level of frustration and alienation. Beyond the bias and the insults, what it comes down to is the fact that I have to mourn the loss of what I thought would be a brilliant career in academia and the art world. I must come to terms with the fact that I will not be enjoying that sense of belonging, of camaraderie and collegiality that every person looks forward to in their chosen field. Clearly I am not as welcome as I had hoped.

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I am a 2nd generation Israeli. Both my parents were born in Israel and served in the army. My mother's parents were both Sephardic; her father and his family banished from Arab lands in the early 20th century, and her mother and family living in Jerusalem for many generations, originally banished from Spain. My father's side is Ashkenazi. His parents left Poland early, in 1922, as young idealistic Zionists, to come to a small strip of land, then still known by its Roman name *Palestine*. Those who stayed behind in Poland were all murdered in Treblinka. (My great grandfather, a prominent Warsaw-area rabbi, was a victim of the infamous Black Friday, a horrific Nazi pogrom which took place on June 27, 1941, in which he and hundreds of other Jews were burnt alive inside the Great Synagogue in Bialystok.) Drying the swamps of this forgotten wasteland—her new home—my paternal grandmother lost her firstborn twin girls to malaria. Roughly twenty years later, in 1948, she lost her eldest son when he was killed by a terrorist just days after the war of Independence was supposedly over. Unfortunately, my father—then a 14 year old boy—witnessed the entire thing, a formative trauma in his life from which he was always running. Enter, *me!* Born in the mid-60s, a product of all this tragedy, living out all the subsequent displacement and fractured identity that comes with such a story—ironically, back in the Diaspora. As a musical theater performer in my younger days, I would find myself on stage in the Anatevka number in 'Fiddler,' *really understanding* what it's like to always have to leave. At *Sunrise, Sunset*, I would always cry on stage. It was very distracting. Flash forward to today and to all the insults and incidents that I've been telling you about, and there's just so much a person can take.

I finally decided enough was enough. It was time to do something. But rather than just lash out, I waited until I came up with something clever. And so here's what I did.

I decided to write a little addendum to my doctoral dissertation and ask Penn State to file it in my manuscript. In it, I symbolically disavow all the references to the research of one writer in particular: Judith Butler. In my mind, Butler—a professor of rhetoric at Berkeley and a hero of the postmodern left—sums up all that is topsy-turvy and twisted in American and European liberal academia today, which is where much anti-Israelism, anti-Zionism and antisemitism foment.

Here is the addendum:

As an Israeli artist and scholar, and as a secular liberal humanist, it is a source of great anguish for me to know that one of the writers to which I refer in my doctoral dissertation turns out to be a rabid anti-Israelist, anti-Zionist and, for all intents and purposes, an anti-Semite.

According to her vocal activism, Judith Butler, Professor of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, believes that Israel is a colonialist occupier and an inhumane oppressor.^{1,2} She and others like her often equate Israel with South Africa, mischaracterizing it as a violent Apartheid state.³ Butler's views are manifestly acted upon through her support of the Boycotts, Divestments and Sanctions (BDS) movement, whose aim is to continually vilify and isolate various aspects of Israeli society—especially academia.

Such characterizations of Israel, propagated by Butler and her cohorts, amount to biased, false propaganda. When Butler expresses such views, she betrays a lack of knowledge of the ancient and modern Israel, one that represents dangerous ignorance at best, and at worst—willful, ideological erasure.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a complex one. Butler seems to lack both an informed historical context and basic, on-the-ground factual information needed to make fair observations. (She is of course a professor of rhetoric and comparative literature, and not a scholar of Middle East history.) This leads her and her cohorts to reduce challenging geopolitical conflicts to surprisingly simple binaries of oppressor and victim, good and evil⁴—the kind of binaries poststructuralists like her generally disavow. One wonders: what makes Butler deviate from her own espoused philosophies on this particular issue? For someone so familiar with critical theory, she is a strangely uncritical critic of my country.

And yet there is much irony here. The country Butler vilifies is the only thriving democracy in the Middle East where someone like her—a woman, a lesbian, and a political agitator—would be protected. The people in whose name she purports to speak, however, would oppress, punish and possibly put her to death merely for who she is. In light of this selective blindness, it can only be surmised that Butler *et al* are operating with a special kind of bias, a scapegoating that is all too familiar to students of history. To those who would distinguish between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, I retort *there is no difference*: to be anti-Israel is to be anti-Jewish. Israel is the Jewish state.

Of course, the other great irony is the fact that Butler herself is Jewish. Despite this fact, she seems to have little to no appreciation for her people's history and the kind of deep memory and moral responsibility it entails. Instead, she opts to identify with neo-Leftist academics whose zealous and sanctimonious policing of global injustices have cultivated this special and disproportionate animosity toward Israel. Instead of allowing her own persecuted status as a Jewish lesbian to inform a subtle, empathic interpretation, Butler seems to preemptively apologize for her own academic success and social acceptance by self-effacingly criticizing her own people—a classic and all too common unconscious self-hatred (See Marx, Arendt, Chomsky, etc.) To appease her colleagues and ostensibly to ensure her status, she performs this brand of self-righteous academic extra-curricular activism. Unfortunately, Butler's behavior is symptomatic of the false sense of security that many American Jewish intellectuals suffer, now 70-plus years removed from the gas chambers of Europe. As though it could never happen again.

Apparently, it bears repeating: The Jewish people have a painful history. Centuries of exile, persecution and violence culminated in the well-organized European Holocaust. This finally led the community of nations in 1948 to help *re*-establish the State of Israel where it had always been, two millennia before the advent of Islam or the Roman word *Palestine*. And while Jews agreed to share the land with the peoples who had since taken up residence there in their absence, their unfriendly neighbors rejected the offer. Israelis have been fighting ever since to safeguard their extremely small country, the only viable safe haven away from historic European anti-Semitism and now its Western and Islamic manifestations.

Therefore, Butler's characterization and neat distinction between Israel as colonialist and exploitive, and Hamas and Hezbollah as 'leftist' and 'progressive' (her words)^{5, 6, 7} is bizarre as it is fundamentalist. Her strange sympathies with and tacit activism on behalf of such known terrorist organizations calls her understanding, judgment and therefore her scholarship into question. If she is interested in colonial land-grabbing and oppression of a native people, she could start much closer to home.

Butler is of course not alone. She is a product of American and European academia, where, to prove their grasp of and allegiance to 'progressive politics,' many a provincial professor cynically and expediently jumps on the politically correct bandwagon of the decade. In this particular case, ground zero for this misguided and dangerous anti-Zionism has indeed been California institutions of higher education,^{8, 9} where Butler has used her tenure to help breed a resurgent and virulent anti-Israelism and anti-Semitism from the Left. The rhetoric is couched in the guise of an erudite, theoretical, post-colonial, multiculturalist critique and, needless to say, is delivered in a lather of postmodern gibberish so self-referentially incoherent it could be termed anti-social. The half-baked, ahistorical ideations that brew there tend to metastasize through self-congratulatory academic publishing and conferences, and had indeed reached Penn State by the time I was there.

So uncomfortable has the situation gotten in academia, with both veiled and overt anti-Israel and anti-Jewish hostilities, that I can no longer remain silent. That is why I have decided to start my own movement called Retractions and Disavowals in Scholarship, or RDS. This movement calls on all academics to examine and re-examine ongoing and completed research, for questionable sources, and where necessary, to retract and disavow portion that originate with biased writers—however veiled or fashionable their speech. While dissertations and theses cannot be changed after their publishing, addendums may be added, like this one.

I am a proud Jew and a proud Israeli. I come from an historic, beautiful and friendly country that has given much to world civilization. In its recent reincarnation as a modern state, Israel continues to bestow its gifts—scientific, technological, literary, artistic and academic. I brought my intellect, inquiry and scholarship to Penn State, as well as my sense of social justice to help improve the campus community in the four-and-a-half years I was there. Had I known of Judith Butler's unconscionable politics, as they were brewing, I never would have included her writings along with mine. Let it be known to any reader that I lament the inclusion of biased and socially irresponsible writers in my dissertation, and I am confident that history will vindicate me.

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¹ Cihan Aksan and Jon Bailes, "The Discourse of Terror: An Interview with Judith Butler," in *Weapon of the Strong: Conversations on US State Terrorism* (London: Pluto Press, 2013).

² Judith Butler, "No, it's not anti-semitic." *London Review of Books* 25 no. 16 (2003): 19-21, accessed February 6, 2014, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n16/judith-butler/no-its-not-anti-semitic>

³ Corey Balsam, "Judith Butler to speak at Israeli Apartheid Week in Toronto," *rabble.ca*, March 4, 2011, accessed February 6, 2014, <http://rabble.ca/news/2011/03/judith-butler-speak-israeli-apartheid-week-toronto>

⁴ Judith Butler. *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 210-213.

⁵ "Judith Butler on Hamas, Hezbollah & the Israel Lobby (2006)," *radicalarchives*, January 13, 2014, accessed February 6, 2014, <http://radicalarchives.org/2010/03/28/jbutler-on-hamas-hezbollah-israel-lobby/>

⁶ Seyla Benhabib, "Ethics without Normativity and Politics without Historicity On Judith Butler's Parting Ways. Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism," *Constellations* 20:1 (2013): 150, accessed February 6, 2014, DOI: 10.1111/cons.12028.

⁷ Richard Landes and Benjamin Weinthal, "The Post-Self-Destructivism of Judith Butler," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 9, 2012, accessed February 6, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390443921504577641351255227554>

⁸ Larry Greenfield, "The Rise of Campus Anti-Zionism in California," *inFocus Quarterly* Winter (2008), accessed February 6, 2014, <http://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/458/the-rise-of-campus-anti-zionism-in-california>

⁹ Tammi Rossman-Benjamin, "Anti-Zionism and the Abuse of Academic Freedom: A Case Study at the University of California, Santa Cruz," *Jerusalem Center For Public Affairs*, January 5, 2009, accessed February 6, 2014, <http://jcpa.org/article/anti-zionism-and-the-abuse-of-academic-freedom-a-case-study-at-the-university-of-california-santa-cruz>

Penn State refused to add this brief statement to my original dissertation, so I decided to disseminate it widely on my own via email and the Internet. I am so glad that Penn State refused, because what followed was nothing short of amazing! The responses started to pour in; not only from colleagues and friends, but from noted figures. Renowned author and feminist Phyllis Chesler featured my statement in a wonderfully supportive article in Arutz Sheva/Israel National News. Journalist Joshua Levitt interviewed me for an article that appeared in the Algemeiner. Alan Dershowitz emailed to congratulate me. English-language Tel Aviv radio station TLV1 requested a live phone interview. Blogs and websites began reprinting my statement. The circulation was fast, effective and global. Then, individuals from all over the world, including Israel, Canada, Australia, and Nigeria, contacted me simply to say that my story resonated with them and that they offer their full support. I was so happy. Apparently, I had touched a nerve, articulating the thoughts and frustrations of many. I decided to start an 'RDS Group' on Facebook, and quickly garnered dozens of followers. Finally, I found my support system. Of course, the best out-of-the-blue congratulatory phone call came from distinguished scholar Charles Asher Small of ISGAP... and here I am today.

The work continues, but the lesson was a valuable one. *Never underestimate the power of one individual to make a difference.* I never dreamed how many people I would reach when I was sitting alone at my computer, penning my addendum. I never dreamed how my life would change for the better. Today, I still have a foot in academia, but I am also allotting equal amounts of time to my activism. Indeed, the parallels are clear, as I utilize my skills as a teacher and an artist to fight anti-Zionism and antisemitism.

POSTSCRIPT:

In the spring of 2014, while my piece had been circulating widely, Judith Butler was scheduled to speak at a Kafka conference at the Jewish Museum in New York. The Algemeiner's Joshua Levitt contacted me again to get my thoughts on the matter, and of course I expressed my incredulity. Apparently, that second Algemeiner article was instrumental and rallying enough protest that the Jewish Museum cancelled the event. I am uncertain whether Ms. Butler withdrew or was disinvited. Mr. Levitt's article was subsequently picked up by Haaretz, Israel's largest newspaper. About a week later, the person some consider to be the most important living American philosopher wrote me a brief email:

*Dear Dahn Hiuni,
I am wondering whether you might be willing to meet for a coffee or tea in NYC sometime in April? I would like a chance to have a conversation with you. I have the sense we might be able to understand each other better in person, and I would welcome that chance.
Judith Butler*

I debated at length whether or not to meet with Butler. Would it make a difference? Could I hold on my own with this very brilliant if very misguided woman? I sought the advice of friends, family and my RDS membership, and was issued many suggestions. In the end, while I hold dialogue and exchange as primary ethics in my life, I decided not to take Ms. Butler up on her offer. The main reason was because of her on-the-record support for terrorist groups Hamas and Hezbollah. I thought that was beyond the pale. Besides, I had heard enough of Butler. It was time for her to hear me.