

# The Op-Ed Pages

## “Boycott Israel,” the Movie – Starring Emma Thompson

By Ben Cohen,  
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If Hollywood ever makes a movie about the movement to boycott Israel, I can think of no one better suited to the starring role than Emma Thompson.

I imagine Thompson’s character as a school-teacher or a librarian, dowdy looking with just a hint of prettiness. She lives alone in a cozy apartment filled with potted plants and books on personal growth, third-world politics, and vegetarian cookery. Her significant other is a fluffy cat that nestles in her lap every night as she sits in front of her computer reading the latest dispatches from occupied “Palestine,” her face etched with righteous disbelief. She doesn’t have time for a boyfriend, but that won’t stop her would-be suitor, an equally self-righteous, mildly kooky Jewish writer—think Peter Beinart—from trying to win her heart.

By the time we’re halfway through the film, Emma will have decided that she simply must visit the West Bank, despite the enormous dangers posed by the Israeli occupation forces. She comes to this awareness while attending a Passover Seder hosted by her aspiring boyfriend, during which he pulls out a fading photograph of his great-grandmother who was



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murdered during the Holocaust.

Fighting back the tears, he confides that, “If she could see what Israel has become, she’d die all over again from the shame.” The two fall into each other’s arms, waking the next morning to a breakfast of matzo brei—as Emma tries to pronounce the name of the dish she’s eating, we giggle through the obligatory moment of light relief—before she’s whisked away in a taxi to the airport, and then to the beautiful-yet-tragic land of Palestine.

In the West Bank, she cavorts with cute little kids—“just like the ones I teach back home”—drinks mint tea with effusive women who bear the daily humiliation of occupation with a smile and a shrug, and admires the steely-eyed men who stand up to the nasty Israelis with all the conviction of a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King.

Emma embraces their anger but concludes that violence is not the answer. Just before she leaves the Palestinian village that now feels like home, she regales the enthusiastically nodding villagers with a speech—tearful, of course—expounding on the importance of non-violence. “Don’t use bombs,” she exhorts. “Use boycotts.” Their applause can be heard all the way to the adjacent Israeli army base,

where the commander is suddenly struck by the realization that the Palestinian aspiration for freedom can never be crushed.

Roll the credits. And don’t call it a chick flick.

With a movie like this one, art would be imitating life—to be precise, Emma Thompson’s life. Recently, the Oscar-winning actress joined with other darlings of stage and screen to protest the participation of Tel Aviv’s venerable Habimah Theater in a London festival that is performing the plays of William Shakespeare in 37 different languages.

In a letter published by *The Guardian*—a liberal newspaper with a long track record of publishing anti-Semitic material—Thompson and her cohorts slammed “Habima” [sic] for its “shameful record of involvement with illegal Israeli settlements in Occupied Palestinian Territory.” They ended with a demand to exclude the theater from the festival. No such objections were voiced concerning the participation of a Palestinian theater troupe, nor the involvement of the National Theater of China, which is directly funded by one of the world’s most repressive regimes.

In fact, there are many good reasons to ditch political objections and keep the festival open to all—which its organizers, to their credit, have done, in spite of

Thompson’s fulminations. To perform Shakespeare is in itself a celebration of artistic freedom. Habimah’s version of “The Merchant of Venice,” the play that gave us the figure of Shylock, the Jewish moneylender who embodies anti-Semitic canards even as he challenges them, is sure to be enticing. And I would genuinely love to see how actors from communist China interpret the story of “Richard III.”

For those like Emma Thompson, though, boycotts are predicated on supposedly universal principles and then applied to only one target—Israel. To understand the strategy here, it’s worth recalling the campaign in the UK for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions. Ten years ago, an article in *The Guardian* noted that Israel’s universities are victims of their own success: “The nature of Israel’s academic pre-eminence,” the article explained, “makes it vulnerable to a boycott.”

The same logic applies to the flourishing arts scene in Israel. The excellence of a theater like Habimah, along with its enthusiasm to perform outside Israel’s borders, renders it a sitting duck for boycott campaigners. In their warped view of the world, Palestinian freedom can only be achieved by quarantining Israelis on the basis of their nationality. Thus do apparently free-spirited

artists echo the racist policies of the Arab League, which began its boycott of the Jewish community in Eretz Israel in 1945, three years before the state of Israel was born.

What, then, is the appropriate response to Emma Thompson and those like her? Certainly not to make the movie I described earlier. Instead, they should be given a taste of their own medicine.

We are often told that Jews run Hollywood—the same Hollywood that carried on casting Vanessa Redgrave, Emma Thompson’s fellow Brit, in leading roles after she denounced so-called “Zionist hoodlums” in an Oscar acceptance speech in 1978. Will the studio moguls continue to indulge Thompson as they indulged Redgrave? Or will they show some gumption, and tell her that, for as long as she seeks to discriminate against Israeli artists, she will be banished from our screens?

I think I know, sadly, what the answer is. But I’d love to be proved wrong. ✨

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## What Do Jewish Students Need Most? Courage

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The last shot fired in the nasty combat being carried out on our nation’s campuses took place at Florida Atlantic University, where a pro-Palestinian group posted mock “eviction” notices on dorm room doors that contained a laundry list of anti-Israel propaganda points. Their stated intent was to make students identify with the plight of displaced Palestinian Arabs and denied that Jewish students were particularly targeted for “eviction,” a point that defenders of the action highlighted after the fact when the university was forced to apologize for approving the stunt.

But there’s little doubt this incident, like many others that have taken place in other venues around the country, sought to both throw down a challenge and to intimidate pro-Israel students. As is often the case on campuses, the anti-Israel forces are louder and generally more willing to engage in confrontations. They also often have the backing of the faculty and Middle East Studies departments.

Though America remains a place where support for the Jewish state cuts across almost all political, religious, and social boundaries, and academia is the exception to the rule. In the classrooms,

Jewish students are sometimes forced to face off against not just other students but teachers. On campus common areas where “Israel is apartheid” exhibits are set up, they are subjected to other forms of harassment.

While some stand up and fight back, others keep quiet. Still others take up the cudgels for the Palestinians seeking to distance themselves from an unpopular and, more to the point, unfashionable cause.

What is to be done?

Some hope to foster the creation of departments, courses and professors who are not ideological hostile to Israel. More Jewish education in which young Jews will be reinforced with the facts they need to defend their position in the rough and tumble of campus debate is almost certainly a far better bet. Even more important is the task of getting as many young Jews to visit Israel as possible via the successful Birthright Israel project.

But there is another factor that is more crucial and not just a matter of funding or programming. That element is courage.

It is that quality above all that Jews must cultivate in their leaders as well as in their children. Jews must teach their children not merely the facts about Israel, but also not to be afraid of standing up when they speak up on its behalf. They must learn to have faith in the justice of this cause and to ignore the catcalls of those who claim they are out of step with the

liberal intellectual culture of the day.

That is, admittedly, not an easy thing to ask of anyone. It is difficult to swim against the stream or to talk back to teachers. But that is what we must ask of them.

Anti-Zionism is merely the latest variant of an old and persistent virus: anti-Semitism. Anyone who would deny the Jews and their state the same rights and protections they readily grant any other country and who judge it by standards they never apply to others are simply practicing bias that we must not refrain from calling by its right name: Jew hatred.

## Hate Crimes

(Continued from previous page)

a founding member, promised in 2003 in Vienna to start gathering data on hate crimes, including anti-Semitic ones. Today, nearly a decade later, a meager five of those states submitted data on anti-Semitic incidents, according to the latest OSCE report. The United States was not one of them.

To be sure, this reflects the situation in America, as noted in a report by the Anti-Defamation League: “Eighty of the largest cities in the United States either did not report data to the FBI in 2010 or affirmatively reported zero hate crimes to the FBI in 2010.”

This means that organizations such as the ADL do not have consistent usable data on hate crimes,

The youth of this era must relearn what previous generations came to understand in past struggles for Jewish rights: that those who will not stand up for the Jews will inevitably be asked some day why they did nothing. They must do so not in the name of a mythical perfect Israel as its opponents claim, but on behalf of a living breathing imperfect and at times infuriating country that is judged by a double standard not applied to any other country. They must do so not because they necessarily like its politics or its leaders, but because it has the same right to exist in freedom and security as

any other nation.

Without the courage to speak up against this virus of hate, all the knowledge and funding will go for naught. Above all what is needed is a new generation of Jewish students who are not prepared to stand silent while the mob of appeasers and liars howl for Israel’s blood. ✨

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Institute actually have the impact they are intended to have. Without knowing whether there is less or more anti-Semitism today than a year ago, we cannot know how worried we should be about our future — for worry we will.

Just as businesses measure their success by collecting data on how many hamburgers or sneakers they have sold, by comparing this year’s data to last year’s and their sales to those of their competitors, so too should hate crimes be properly monitored. The U.S. government, with its 55 partners in the OSCE, has committed itself to doing this. We must press our governments to keep their promises. ✨

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