

Money, morals an Israel: An exchange: Occupation is the issue

by [Vernon S. Broyles III](#) in the [February 8, 2005](#) issue

This reply is the fourth part of a four-part exchange on the divestment policy of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The other three parts are:

[Vernon S. Broyles III's statement](#) of his position

[Barbara Wheeler's response](#) to Broyles

[Ira Youdovin's response](#) to Broyles

Barbara Wheeler opens her critique by saying, “Divestment is a strategy that can be effective only if widely adopted.” While there is some truth to that, it does not and should not, in and of itself, deter actions of conscience by either individuals or major church bodies. In fact, we are not alone. Other groups are already initiating actions of their own, and the number of those expressing support and solidarity is growing. Who knows where this will lead?

Wheeler’s second objection is the one that is raised every time there is a proposal for divestment: if you sell your stock, someone with lower moral values may buy it. That is always possible. But if negotiations have failed, that is hardly a reason to hold on to securities of companies that are engaged in egregious practices.

She mentions “boycotts.” This is by no means a boycott. Nor is its purpose to create economic instability in Israel. It is to create pressure on the Israeli government and its supporters to stop their illegal, immoral and brutal occupation. In point of fact, it is the financial and human cost of maintaining the occupation and the oppression that has already destabilized Israeli society, stressed generations of youth who face mandatory conscription and made Israel a pariah in much of the world.

Wheeler’s rosy description of Israel’s “democratic government” ignores the multiple standards of democracy in Israel. If one is a Jew anywhere in the world, one can show up and be welcomed into citizenship. But if one is an Arab Israeli citizen, there are different rules and rights of citizenship. A Palestinian who is a longtime resident

of East Jerusalem may not even have those rights. That looks very much like the American South in the 1950s when there was also “democracy” for blacks.

I agree wholeheartedly with Wheeler that we must move in positive ways to “prevail upon our government” to move aggressively and evenhandedly to reactivate and encourage the peace process. We would do well also to prevail upon our Jewish friends to join us in that task. It is a fact that the U.S. Jewish community is one of the most powerful political forces in America. Unfortunately, its traditional commitment to human rights has been largely absent with regard to the rights of Palestinians, and at times those who have spoken out have been punished.

Wheeler raises the issue of anti-Semitism. Agreed. We and our forebears are complicit in perpetuating anti-Jewish sentiments and behaviors, many of which linger. For that we must all ask forgiveness. But to the degree that Christian guilt over the Holocaust blocks us from naming Israeli injustices, or that Jewish victimhood makes it impossible for our Jewish sisters and brothers to connect their suffering with that of the Palestinians at the hands of Israelis, we will not find our way out of this morass.

The solution is not about everyone being “a little disappointed.” It is about choosing life over death for all parties involved. That does not come with giving “a little bit here and a little bit there.” It comes, in Christian parlance, with both parties taking up their “cross” and offering themselves to their “enemies” in the “restraint, humility and respect” for which Barbara Wheeler so aptly appeals.

Ira Youdovin opens his critique by referring to the General Assembly’s “declaration of economic warfare against the state of Israel.” This is a perfect example of the hyperbole that makes it so hard to have a productive conversation about the crisis in Israel/Palestine. The measure is not about “economic warfare against the state of Israel.” It is an effort to bring pressure on Israel to end a long, rapacious occupation that has cost the lives of thousands of innocent Palestinians while failing to stop the acts of terrorism perpetrated by certain members of the Palestinian community against Israelis.

It is equally dishonest to suggest that “the leitmotif running through official PCUSA documents” is the “two-pronged strategy of demonizing Israel while whitewashing Palestinian terrorism.” Only the most extreme bias could lead to such a caricature of the policy history of the PCUSA on the region. Contrary to Youdovin’s claim, Israel’s

right to land and security has been consistently affirmed and Palestinian acts of terror have been named and condemned again and again.

For some reason, Rabbi Youdovin has chosen to respond to the core of my article by attacking an ancillary document that is not a part of the policy actions of the General Assembly. At no point does he respond to the central demand of the General Assembly on which the divestment recommendation rests—the termination of the Israeli occupation.

His assertion, framed as a “question,” that the Presbyterian leaders have “turned a blind eye on Palestinian terrorism” is simply false.

His second assertion, also framed as a “question,” that the PCUSA is “an apologist for demented killers who strap explosives to their bodies and go off to murder innocent men, women and children on school buses or in pizza parlors, or who are gathered for a Passover seder,” is not worthy of a reply.

If my pointing out the reluctance of Jews in this country to criticize Israel is simply an “old canard,” then where are the vocal advocates for a just resolution of the conflict, especially one that involves Palestinian rights? Youdovin reminds us, appropriately, of the vigorous debates within Israel “in the press and media, as well as in coffeehouses, cafés and living rooms.” Having said that, rather than offering significant evidence of American Jews speaking out against U.S. policy and the injustices of the occupation, he simply says, “Similarly, American Jews are far from being of one mind on the Palestinian issue.” Hardly an affirmation of strong voices against injustice from this side of the Atlantic.

Rabbi Youdovin closes with quotes from Rabbis for Human Rights. I should like to close my comments with a quote from another Jewish group, Jewish Voice for Peace, which offered praise for the PCUSA’s divestment action and then remarked: “The best way to stop the growing divestment movement is to eliminate its root cause—Israel’s illegal occupation of Palestinian land.” So may it be.