

**OVERVIEW: PROGRESSIVE JEWISH PERSPECTIVES ON PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ISRAEL
DIVESTMENT RESOLUTION
EXCERPT FROM A LETTER & FROM REMARKS TO THE CHICAGO PRESBYTERY FROM
CHICAGO PEACE NOW PRESIDENT GIDON D. REMBA**

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What I say below is my own personal view, and not the official position of Chicago Peace Now, the organization I lead, or of Americans for Peace Now, the national organization of which we are a part. But I believe my remarks reflect views and feelings held by everyone I have spoken with on the Chicago Peace Now Board, consisting of rabbis, activists, scholars and other Jews committed to promoting a just Middle East peace. I write as a Jewish peace activist, scholar and community leader who has devoted great efforts for over thirty years, both in Israel-Palestine and in the United States, to promoting peace and reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis, Arabs and Jews.

Progressive Jewish Views of the PC(USA) Divestment Resolution

I strongly believe that the decision of the PC(USA) to pursue a policy of selective phased divestment from certain companies doing business with Israel has wrought, and is continuing to wreak, incalculable damage to Presbyterian-Jewish relations in the United States and to the cause of Palestinian-Israeli peace which it was intended to serve. By treating Israel, the Jewish state—a place which, its faults notwithstanding, is regarded by Jews worldwide as a haven from persecution for Jews in distress—as a pariah state in the same class as genocidal Sudan and apartheid South Africa, PC(USA)'s divestment resolution has caused deep pain and anguish among the overwhelming majority of Jews.

The resolution is unreasonably and immorally one-sided in practice, given that the church is not at the same time pursuing divestment from US companies doing business in those Arab countries which aid and abet Palestinian terrorism against innocent Israeli Jews, or against any other countries committing more egregious human rights violations than Israel. Moreover, *the original resolution takes no economic steps whatsoever to either encourage moderate pro-peace forces among Palestinians and Arabs, or to discourage extremist views and actions on the part of groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades which seriously undermine the prospects for Palestinian-Israeli peace and which gravely violate the human rights of Israeli Jews (and Israeli Arabs).* Every major human rights group—including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and B'Tselem: The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories—has found that suicide bombings and other attacks against noncombatant Israeli men, women and children—including civilians residing in Israeli settlements which violate international law—are crimes against humanity. Yet the PC(USA) resolution does not see fit to go beyond rhetorical condemnation of these grievous crimes, singling out only Israeli actions, and companies doing business with Israel, for punitive economic sanctions.

Americans for Peace Now's (APN) official position is to “strongly oppose one-sided actions and statements, including divestment, that appear to solely blame Israel for the current conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. These types of initiatives are morally and historically inappropriate and destructive to reconciliation between the Jewish state of Israel and Palestinian statehood.” Moreover, APN believes that “the process of providing Israel with security and the Palestinians with self-determination should be the primary focus of all those who are concerned about the conflict.”

PC(USA) 2005 Divestment Criteria: Still Egregiously Imbalanced and Inadequate: Since passing the original grossly one-sided divestment resolution in July 2004, PC(USA) has, in December 2004, issued a set of criteria for identifying “multinational corporations in Israel and Palestine and to implement the General Assembly policy of phased selective divestment.” Yet even these divestment criteria, which include the belated addition of a criterion that targets for possible divestment “corporations that provide products and services to

Israeli or Palestinian organizations/groups that support or facilitate violent acts against innocent civilians,” thereby including corporations supporting Palestinian terrorism, are egregiously imbalanced and inadequate. Fully five of the six criteria for divestment refer to companies supporting the Israeli occupation and Israeli settlements or the “Israeli Separation Barrier,” making it clear that the focus of the church’s divestment policy remains Israel, and that the church continues to place disproportionate blame on Israel for the lack of peace. Further, the church is not pursuing systematic divestment from US or other companies doing business in those Arab countries which aid and abet Palestinian terrorism against innocent Israeli Jews, or from companies doing business with any of the many other countries committing more egregious human rights violations than Israel. Instead, the list of corporations which are included in the February 2005 updated roster of targeted corporations, the “2005 General Assembly Divestment List”, focuses almost exclusively on US military industries, companies which often provide key defensive weapons systems to Israel as well as to the US armed services (the main exception to this is tobacco companies).

Some companies are targeted for divestment merely because they are among the “leading military contractors” or depend on “military contracts for more than 60% of their sales.” For example, Northrup Grumman’s offense is that it is “the third largest military contractor, making weapons such as the B-2 [stealth] bomber, surveillance systems and the C-17 [troop] transport.” No distinction whatsoever is made by PC(USA) between the legitimate and just uses of such weapons and military support systems for the self-defense of the United States and Israel and immoral and unlawful uses. In fact, the B-2 bomber played a major role in NATO’s humanitarian intervention against Yugoslavia in Kosovo, helping to stop Serbian atrocities, as well as in missions against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Finally, no companies appear on the divestment list at this point for doing business with oil-rich Arab or Muslim countries which support terrorism against Israelis or Americans, such as US-based multinational corporations like Halliburton and Bechtel or the various US, European and other foreign oil and high technology conglomerates operating in Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Progressive American Jewish Pro-Israel Groups Unanimously Oppose Divestment: The leadership of the Union for Reform Judaism and the Central Conference of American Rabbis, representing the largest Jewish denomination in the United States, wrote as follows in their July 27, 2004 letter to Rev. Clifton Kirkpatrick, who heads PC(USA):

Your support of divestment from Israel creates a worrisome double standard. Are human rights violations by Israel greater than those committed by the Palestinians? By the Syrians? By the Iranians? We have to ask ourselves - and we encourage you to ask yourselves - why this attack focused on the only democracy in the region? Notwithstanding her faults and missteps as she wrestles to deal with legitimate security concerns, Israel has been and remains a far more open, tolerant, and democratic nation than any other in the Middle East. Surely one can be critical of specific policies of the Israeli government, as we ourselves have been from time to time, but this blatantly anti-Israel affront stymies legitimate criticism born of a true love for Israel and peace.

Not only has a resolution opposing the PC(USA)’s divestment resolution passed unanimously by the United Jewish Communities, the umbrella group representing 155 Jewish Federations and 400 independent Jewish communities across North America, but *every progressive Jewish group in the organized Jewish community has condemned the divestment resolution in forceful terms.* These include a host of Jewish groups who are at the forefront of working for Palestinian-Israeli peace and for Palestinian and Israeli civil, human and national rights—including

- **Peace Now in Israel and the US**, the oldest and largest national Jewish group working in both countries for a comprehensive negotiated Arab-Israeli peace;
- **Brit Tzedek v’Shalom: The Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace**, a large grassroots national Jewish group also working for a negotiated Palestinian-Israeli peace;

- **The Union for Reform Judaism**, the synagogue arm of the Reform Movement in North America, the largest segment of North American Jewry, representing 1.5 million Reform Jews in more than 900 congregations in the United States and Canada. (All other Jewish religious denominations in the US—Orthodox, Conservative and Reconstructionist—concur in their opposition to divestment of every kind.)
- **Meretz USA: For Israeli Civil Rights and Peace:** the Meretz-Yahad Party in Israel is headed by Yossi Beilin, the lead negotiator on the Israeli side for the Geneva Initiative, the unofficial model peace treaty drafted by a group of leading Palestinians and Israelis;
- **Ameinu/Our People: Liberal Values, Progressive Israel** works for peace, economic justice and pluralism in Israel and America through a variety of programs and activities and is affiliated with the Labor Party in Israel.
- **Rabbis for Human Rights (RHR), and RHR-North America**, the rabbinic voice of conscience in Israel, giving voice to the Jewish tradition of human rights, promoting justice and freedom, while campaigning against discrimination and inhumane conduct.
- **The Shefa Fund**, a significant funder of Israeli peace groups.

Rabbis for Human Rights (RHR) believes that the resolutions of the Presbyterian Church have violated “the human rights of Jews to respectful equal treatment,” giving “evidence of great difficulty in truly hearing what Jewish voices have to say.” In RHR’s view, PC(USA)’s call to selectively divest from “multinational corporations operating in Israel” results in “discrimination against Jews and their state”. In their open letter to PC(USA), RHR explains its perspective in language so trenchant that I feel compelled to quote it more fully:

Your resolution purporting to support the Geneva Initiative declares without reservation that the “occupation...has proven to be at the root of evil acts committed against innocent people on both sides of the conflict.” Like you, we hate the Occupation, condemn it and work for its speedy end in a peace accord. However, the Occupation cannot be used to excuse the re-awakening of demons. We are appalled that you conceptualize this Occupation in the same one-sided terms that have been applied for so long by Christian Churches to the real or perceived sins of Jews. Your simplistic declaration is inaccurate and inadequate to explain the situation in all its tragic moral complexity. It is not just that your resolution ignores the homicidal ideologies that have so sadly taken hold among some of our Palestinian neighbors. Nor is the problem that it averts its eyes from the attempts to destroy our country that transcend the Occupation and precede it by decades. Its deepest flaw lies in the ramifications of the highly charged language you employ. Particularly insensitive to history and appalling in its potential consequences is the allegation that the Occupation is somehow “at the root of evil acts committed.” This is a restatement of the paradigmatic allegation that Jewish sins are somehow especially significant, especially “at the root of evil.”

You passed a resolution directed as a “call ...on the Israeli government,” describing the Occupation in a way that profoundly places Israeli sin alone at the heart of the situation. While we recognize that you deplore terror against Israelis, you direct not one word of criticism to the government of the Palestinian Authority [then led by Yasser Arafat] despite its manifest multitude of profound sins against God and the Human Rights of Palestinians and Jews. You ignore the incontrovertible fact that this catastrophe is the product of many causes and that there is guilt enough to share between all parties. People of conscience must act in awareness that singling out, magnifying and sanctifying Jewish sins has always been at the core of the terrible evil that we know as anti-Semitism. Failing in this awareness, you cross a line that people of good conscience dare not cross...

Finally, RHR criticizes PC(USA) for incongruously endorsing both the Geneva Initiative and divestment, a strategy which flouts the very mutuality and reconciliation on which the Geneva Initiative is predicated. "At the heart of the Geneva Initiative lies the hope of attaining peace and justice in the Land through mutual respectful recognition between Palestinians and Jews. This hope cannot be credibly supported by a group of

people who pass resolutions that support missionary activity directed at Jews, revive discredited rhetoric in regard to Jewish sin, and promote collective economic punishment and discrimination against Jews."

Now I do not believe that the leadership of PC(USA) is in fact anti-Semitic. I believe that the leadership and many who support divestment in the Church do so out of a sincere belief that it might help their fellow Christians in the Holy Land. But it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the resolution is grossly insensitive to Jewish feelings and rights, and that it has indeed demonized Israel by placing the sole culpability for all "evil" in the Palestinian-Israeli tragedy at the feet of the Jewish state.

A second Rabbis for Human Rights letter to Rev. Kirkpatrick of PC(USA), from executive director Rabbi Arik Ascherman, dated January 13, 2005, states that "we remain concerned that your resolution may send you down a slippery slope into collective punishment that will harm innocent Israelis without truly affecting the policies we jointly abhor." As Meretz USA wrote to Rev. Kirkpatrick, PC(USA)'s resolution overlooks the fact that "the 'harm' caused [by Israeli actions using equipment manufactured by US companies] may be in furtherance of legitimate security and defense measures meant to protect innocent life... Sadly, many Israeli actions which result in the spilling of innocent Palestinian blood are directly related to Palestinian actions against innocent Israelis." With regard to PC(USA)'s use of the term "root of evil" to describe the Israeli occupation, Rabbi Ascherman warns that "there is a great likelihood that others will read your words as we did, even if this was not your intent...However, this is precisely the intent of the caution in Pirke Avot (The Sayings of the Ancestors), that sages must watch their words." And, while he acknowledges that "ending the occupation will go a long way towards curbing the human rights violations which we struggle against, we again remind you that our conflict began way before the occupation. There are Palestinians who vow to continue their struggle until Israel proper is also eliminated. It is therefore naïve at best to maintain that the occupation is the sole root of the conflict or that ending the occupation will end the conflict."

Israel's Barrier: With regard to PC(USA)'s resolution on Israel's barrier, fence or wall, the leaders of US Reform Judaism have written to the leadership of the church: "We are further dismayed by a separate Overture, also passed at your recent General Assembly, 'On Calling for an End to the Construction of a Wall by the State of Israel.' Yet again, this one-sided approach, which fails to recognize the barrier as a defensive mechanism against terrorism, calls into question your genuine concern for Israel's security. We too have been critical of the route of the barrier (though you misleadingly imply that it is a wall for the majority of its path, when in fact, it is a wall for only approximately five miles). But, by opposing the wall in its entirety without consideration for Israeli life and security, just as by endorsing divestment from Israel, you have singled out Israel unfairly and unjustly...." Had the resolution not called for "an end to the construction of a wall by the state of Israel" but rather for the barrier's route to be changed so as to realize a better balance between the rights of Palestinians to well-being and the rights of Israelis to security, life and to freedom from acts of terror, the resolution would not have been offensive to so many Jews.

Radical Left Jewish Groups Who Support Divestment: While there are a few progressive Jewish groups who have advocated in favor of divestment, such as a California-based group called A Jewish Voice for Peace, none of these groups are clearly committed to Israel's existence as a democratic Jewish state living at peace with a Palestinian Arab state. In practice, such radical left Jewish groups often display an egregious lack of support or sympathy for Israel's security needs, and regularly circulate materials that call Israel a "racist apartheid state." Despite their claims, they remain in fact a small minority in the American Jewish community. Jewish Voice for Peace claims a membership of 30,000. But its financial statement, which is public under federal law, indicates a much smaller number.

Three Key Objections to Divestment

There are many other problems, both moral and practical, with the PC(USA)'s divestment strategy, and they are highlighted well in the statements on this subject by Rabbi Mordechai Liebling of the Shefa Fund and from

Meretz USA, among others. I would like to draw your attention to three which I regard as among the most serious.

Divestment Prevents a Presbyterian-Progressive Jewish Alliance for Peace

By pursuing the divestment strategy, PC(USA) has not only alienated a great many American and Israeli Jews but placed an insurmountable obstacle in the way of an alliance between the Presbyterian Church and the many national American Jewish groups who are working together on a common strategy to promote a just Middle East peace. By building a national alliance with progressive Jewish groups, PC(USA) might have been able to coordinate its lobbying in our nation's capital with the seven major American Jewish organizations that comprise the American Jewish Geneva Initiative Coalition. The voices of many Presbyterians, when added to the tens of thousands of progressive American Jews who are actively engaged in making their own voices heard to the White House and to their members of Congress, could magnify the impact of the message which the progressive Jewish community works to convey to our elected officials. We regularly communicate to these officials our views on what the United States must do to help Palestinians and Israelis move forward towards peace and to end the violence and suffering. Instead, PC(USA) has opted for a strategy that puts it at odds with virtually the entire Jewish community, preventing alliance and cooperation, a course of action which has only injected much new bitterness and divisiveness into our communities over a conflict that is already terrible and bitter. And as both Yossi Beilin, the chief Israeli architect of the Geneva Initiative and Yariv Oppenheimer, the director of Peace Now in Israel, have noted, divestment is more likely to generate anger and mistrust among Israeli Jews and to drive more away from supporting the Israeli peace camp.

Divestment is a Misguided Approach to Socially Responsible Investing

Rabbi Mordechai Liebling of the Shefa Fund has written, "The divestment movement has the potential to undermine the reputation of socially responsible investing. US industry has ties with repressive regimes around the world. Why, at a time when the world is becoming increasingly fundamentalist, is Israel being singled out? Socially responsible investing, including the strategy of shareholder activism, is an increasingly important and effective method of working for political, social and economic justice. If the public perceives that the socially responsible investment movement is unfairly targeting Israel, it becomes vulnerable to charges of anti-Semitism and its reputation will be tarnished."

Second, there are wiser and more just ways to practice socially responsible investing with regard to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Brit Tzedek v'Shalom observes: "there are many ways to support the Palestinian people that contribute positively to the goal of a negotiated solution to the conflict. We support investment in economic support and development projects that have the potential to bring people together rather than driving them apart. Donating to organizations that invest in Palestinian businesses, loan money to development banks involved in micro-lending, help rebuild the infrastructure of the West Bank, invest in promoting dialogue and understanding or provide humanitarian relief for victims of violence are a few examples of how individuals, corporations, organizations and the United States government can support the Palestinian people and activists for a just peace." As Meretz USA points out, "It would have been far more appropriate for the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to invest in one or several of the many non-governmental organizations in Israel and the Palestinian territories which are actively trying to promote justice, relief, and reconciliation."

Divestment Ignores Key Distinctions Between Moral and Immoral Uses of Weapons

Third, objects and equipment are morally neutral; this includes weapons (and barriers), which can be used (and situated) legitimately and lawfully in self-defense or wrongly in acts of unlawful aggression and in the unwarranted violation of human rights. The D-9 bulldozer manufactured by Caterpillar used by Israel to demolish Palestinian homes will also be used to demolish those homes of Israeli settlers and other infrastructure of the Israeli occupation not wanted by the Palestinian Authority when Israel disengages from Gaza and part of

the Northern West Bank, a first and unprecedented move in what most Israelis hope and believe will be a series of far-reaching de-occupation steps. By attempting to discourage sales of these bulldozers to Israel by Caterpillar, selective divestment would also, if successful, discourage the sale of the very equipment which Israel will use to remove some of the trappings of settlements and occupation.

An Appeal for a Presbyterian-Jewish Alliance for Middle East Peace: I think the divestment resolution a great strategic and moral mistake on the part of the church, however well-meaning its proponents may be. It will do far more damage than good. I urge you in the strongest possible terms to renounce it. Rev. Kirkpatrick has stated that “I don’t want the money that pays my pension and medical benefits to be invested in companies that profit from bulldozers that demolish Palestinian homes or are building parts of this wall.” (PC(USA) News Service, September 30, 2004, “High-level Presbyterians and Jews Discuss Israel Divestment”). In renouncing divestment, I invite you to make it clear that you regard the building of alliances with the many American Jews who are working for Middle East peace, and the pursuit of a common, truly effective and morally balanced peace strategy, as a higher value than your own desire for moral purity and integrity. The act of choosing rapprochement with your Jewish neighbors would be a bold act of peace which the peoples of Israel and Palestine could view as a model for reconciliation. It would further serve as a model for compromise in a world where there is no perfect justice and where we face many tragic and imperfect choices between competing rights and imperatives. Moreover, such an act would mirror and reinforce what a group of brave Israelis and Palestinians did in forging the Geneva Initiative. Instead of seeking out groups on the fringe of their neighbor’s community, they sought to engage with the moderate mainstream on the other side. I urge you to do the same with the Jewish community. Instead of taking punitive steps, take positive steps. Work in tandem on a national scale with the many American Jews who truly care about Israel and its people’s security and whose concern for Israel’s well-being impels them to support Palestinian national and human rights.

In conclusion, I am gratified that we have had several opportunities for genuine dialogue and for frank and heartfelt exchanges of ideas and feelings in our various conversations and group meetings. These include, most recently, the opportunity I was afforded, along with several other Jewish leaders, to address 300 church leaders at the Chicago Presbytery Assembly meeting in April 2005. I believe that you and many in the Presbyterian community are genuinely committed to healing relations between Presbyterians and Jews and to seeking peace and justice for Israelis and Palestinians. I look forward to continuing the dialogue, as do my colleagues from Chicago Peace Now, in other forums, both public and private, large and small.

Shalom v’Salam, In Peace,

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