

RESPONSE TO AMITAV GHOSH

23 April 2010

Dear Amitav Ghosh

You have been offered the Dan David Prize, to be presented at Tel Aviv University. It is always nice to have your achievements recognised. And if \$1 million comes with it, even nicer.

Your response to criticism, including ours at BRICUP, has been popping up on too many websites to mention here. Only in one (www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?265154) did you remember to add a paragraph expressing dismay at the policies that Israel is pursuing in Gaza and the West Bank.

Your arguments might be summarised as follows:

- i) the award is by a university, not the state of Israel – so boycott would be misdirected
- ii) institutions of learning and culture “must, in principle, be regarded as autonomous of the state”
- iii) in any case there should never be embargoes and boycotts of culture and learning
- iv) you have already made trips to Myanmar, Sri Lanka and an unnamed Gulf country, where bad things happen. And you withdrew from the Commonwealth Prize competition (not a boycott) in 2001 because you didn't like the word Commonwealth. So your actions are consistent
- v) surely Israel is not so exceptional that its state malevolence contaminates all aspects of civil society

Where to begin? Here are some short answers:

i) Palestinians' options for resistance to the massive strength of the IDF and the ruthlessness with which Israeli state power is deployed against them are extremely limited. Palestinian civil society has overwhelmingly asked the international community for a boycott of higher education and cultural institutions, as part of a general programme of Boycott Divestment and Sanctions. By accepting this prize you are refusing to do the one thing that you can do to support the Palestinians.

ii) Why must universities be so “regarded”? Is it a moral or logical imperative to do so, even when the facts shout out the opposite? Israeli universities are involved up to the neck in the dispossession of the Palestinians, and in the maintenance of the Occupation. Take Tel Aviv University, where the Dan David Prizes are based and where the ceremony will be held. The University is built on the land of the destroyed Palestinian village Sheikh Muwanis, whose residents were deported. Its University Review for Winter 2008-9 boasts of 55 joint technological projects with the Israeli army. The head of TAU's Security Studies Program was a former head of the R&D

Please reply to: BRICUP, BM BRICUP, London WC1N3XX
email: bricup@bricup.org.uk
www.bricup.org.uk

Directorate of the Israel Ministry of Defense; he holds the rank of Major General in the Israel Defense Forces, and is a member of the Knesset. The university appointed as a Law lecturer the colonel who provided the legal justification for Israel's unrestrained assault on Gaza in 2008/9 – who could be eligible for prosecution for war crimes according to the Goldstone Report. Autonomous?

iii) It seems that you don't rule out all boycotts as such (eg consumer boycotts); but you give no reasons why universities and cultural institutions should be specifically off limits. You seem to think that the boycott called for by Palestinian civil society is of individual artists and professors. It is not. The free flow of ideas generated by researchers, authors, artists will not be impeded by the boycott. The boycott is specifically of Israeli *institutions*. By all means speak with, write to, have friends who are Israeli cultural figures. Don't go to Tel Aviv and take this Prize that is "headquartered" there (according to Dan David himself).

iv) There seems to be some rather fine logic chopping in your argument about the Commonwealth Prize, but let that pass. There is no reason to boycott all states which behave badly. Boycott is a political weapon, not a moral imperative. Use it when the cause is just, when the most relevant people have asked for it, when normal politics has failed, and when boycott has a chance of being effective. Israel fits that description.

v) Israel is indeed a special case. What other country that claims to be a democracy has occupied a land belonging to others since 1948, and taken yet more territory, in contravention of innumerable UN resolutions, since 1967? Slowly but surely that occupation has poisoned Israeli society to its roots. You quote Sari Nusseibeh in support of Israeli universities as havens of progressive views. If only! Nusseibeh is isolated as the *only* leading Palestinian academic who has opposed the academic boycott.

The offer of the Dan David Prize gives you a great opportunity. By rejecting it and giving your reasons you will give hope to the oppressed. As a master of prose I am sure you will find compelling words that will attract the attention of the world.

Yours sincerely

Professor Haim Bresheeth
Mike Cushman
Professor David Pegg
Professor Jonathan Rosenhead