

Up against ‘The Wall’

BDS is winning the PR war by ‘influencer-marketing’



By VIRAG GULYAS

Once had a cultural crush on Roger Waters. Whatever music he produced impressed me. I grew up listening to his prominent album *The Wall*; I loved his songs with Pink Floyd and as a result felt I loved him as a person as well. And what do we do with the people we admire? We seek what they preach. And this is where the danger of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions campaign against Israel lies. If I were to turn back time to the days when my ignorance toward Israel was my personal truism, BDS might have won me over.

The BDS campaign was launched in 2005. While it attempted to package itself as a grassroots-led “human rights” organization, in reality, it politicized Israeli-Palestinian affairs and used a systematic campaign to demonize the Jewish state on the false pretenses of international law and UN resolutions.

The movement claims to be inspired by the South African anti-apartheid movement. However, again, that is a well-crafted public-relations trick rather than the reality. Without going too deep into why its mission is false and misleading, let it be enough to say the situations in South Africa and Israel are by no means comparable. The word “apartheid” gained a newfangled meaning due to BDS narratives.

As far as the tools of BDS are concerned, once again, the campaign’s organizers did not invent the wheel. What they do today precisely echoes the organized boycotts against Jewish communities dating back to as early as 1922. Those patterns were later officially adopted by the Arab Leagues in 1945 with the one aim of isolating Israel.

Both campaigns were launched years before the Jewish state was established, and therefore, before the argued Palestinian question was even born. Between these dates, the Nazi Party imposed the same discriminatory rules against Jews in Germany and throughout Europe. Therefore, there is no novelty in the instruments of the BDS movement.

However, BDS is doing something its predecessors could not do. The only difference between the Nazi and Arab boycotts and the BDS campaign is branding. BDS has found its voice in the mainstream mess by its appealing jargon, which deceitfully presents its priorities to be caring for human rights and intersectionality. The success – and danger – of the BDS movement lies not necessarily in its (often falsely) claimed victories, but rather in its understanding of the modern digital tools of new electronic communication and social media.

And this is where we need to go back to my crush on Roger Waters for a second.

The BDS campaign is so much louder than its actual achievements. But the public relations aspect of BDS is winning the war, and it does so through so-called “influencer-marketing.”

THE TERM’S use in a contemporary context is still relatively new to the business world,

let alone to the political human-rights world, although it is not much different from advertising’s “bandwagon” technique.

According to a recent Huffington Post article, “Influencer marketing is simply the action of promoting and selling products or services through people [influencers] who have the capacity to have an effect on the character of a brand.”

And here is where BDS succeeds.

While BDS – as an organized movement against the Jewish state – entered into international consciousness during the infamous 2001 Durban Conference. It officially formed itself in 2005, in perfect time to join the “Web 2.0 Revolution” and the first appearance of social media channels. During the last 12 years, BDS has nailed its PR. It is far from me to endorse BDS in any way, but we need to give it credit for utilizing the new media tools to its advantage in a way that – sadly – they often do better than pro-Israel organizations.

Why do we need to acknowledge this? To be able to fight back.

BDS uses influencers to spread their propaganda messages, and Roger Waters is the campaign’s proud and loud face and voice. But while Waters’s infamous BDS affiliation is well-known, it might be less apparent on others, allowing our artsy crushes on them to keep influencing us.

When Richard Gere said during his last visit to Israel, “There’s no defense of this occupation. Settlements are such an absurd provocation and, certainly in the international sense, completely illegal – and they are certainly not part of the program of someone who wants a genuine peace process,” his words went viral. The main media outlets reported it and after making his statement, the BDS movement – although it begged Gere not to go to Israel

– conveniently used his words to show that even he was on-board.

If I were among the majority, whose understanding about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is reduced to occasionally reading the headlines, Gere might have convinced me. After all, he is the handsome man from *Pretty Woman*, every woman’s fantasy. So honestly, I can’t even blame anyone who is persuaded by these influencers. But Gere isn’t the biggest problem. At least he is not on social media.

Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who on his Facebook profile poses with the Dalai Lama and counts almost four million followers, said, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. In South Africa, we could not have achieved our democracy without the help of people around the world who, through the use of non-violent means, such as boycotts and divestment, encouraged their governments and other corporate actors to reverse decades-long support for the apartheid regime.”

If you love Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama, both of whom are for the majority representatives of peace, humanity and justice, you would not question that statement for a second. And this is emblematic of the effectiveness of influencer marketing – and why the number of BDS supporters is growing.

IF YOU CHECK the social media profiles of the BDS movement, you will find it has more than 90,000 followers on Twitter and more than 165,000 on Facebook. As someone who works in social media, I can attest that these numbers are easily collected and often mean nothing other than dollars spent on social media campaigns. But sadly, BDS has engagement on all platforms. Hundreds and often thousands share its posts – and re-sharing content is pretty much the only true success metric in social media today.

And its reach does not end there. Apart from artists, writers, philosophers and athletes, there is an unplotable web of NGOs that affiliate with BDS and sustain a similarly strong social media presence.

But the main danger lies in BDS talking to

a diverse and varied audience. It talks to Muslims, Christians, atheists and, unfortunately, to Jews. And since it has coined the new buzzword “intersectionality,” it also talks to the Black, feminist and LGBT communities. Whoever believes that BDS is for LGBT rights or women’s rights is naïve, to say the least. BDS is emotionally manipulative. By juxtaposing images of suffering kids, intimidating artists who visit Israel, referring to UN resolutions as their legal validation and neglecting to mention that those resolutions are non-binding – it is winning people over who often cannot not even point to Israel on a map.

How do we fight this far too well-organized media bash? First, we need to acknowledge that is difficult. It is difficult because the Arab-led media back it up, because today even the UN backs it up, because it works as a spreading net. No matter the name of the NGO, they all have one aim: to go against Israel (at a minimum). If you repeat a lie often enough, people will believe it as the truth.

On the other hand, pro-Israel organizations, NGOs and influencers often fight alone.

When an influencer stands against BDS, he or she is accused of being a propaganda machine of Jewish *hasbara*, or public diplomacy. If the influencer is Jewish it is even worse, as being Jewish means you are not credible. If the influencer is not Jewish, the person is said to be paid to spread propaganda the Israelis prescribed.

But I see another disheartening challenge: While in general pro-Israel voices have the same good intentions and fight with their own tools, often they compete for slightly different desired outcome, which results in a weakening of the power of one strong voice – something BDS has.

While the BDS movement is certainly not succeeding in the way it hopes, it still poses a danger of brainwashing the generation to come. This why we need to keep fighting back – with one strong voice, together. ■

The author is a New York City-based writer, personal branding consultant and a non-Jewish pro-Israel voice.



Richard Gere (left), director Joseph Cedar (center) and actor Lior Ashkenazi hold a news conference following the screening of the film ‘Norman’ in Jerusalem last March. (Nir Elias/Reuters)