



Vermonters for a Just Peace in Palestine/Israel

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Margaret Atwood, the Dan David Award, and BDS

A VTJP Perspective

April 27, 2010

Posted below are two letters to Canadian writer Margaret Atwood and another to Indian author Amitov Ghosh. The first letter to Atwood was written by Kathy Shapiro, the second by Mark Hage, and Marc Estrin wrote the letter to Ghosh. All are members of Vermonters for a Just Peace in Palestine/Israel (vtjp.org).

[Letter to Margaret Atwood](#)

[Response to Margaret Atwood](#)

[Response to Amitov Ghosh](#)

The genesis of these communications (and others to Atwood, including those by [Israeli citizens](#) and a group of [besieged students](#) in Gaza) was the announcement that she had been awarded the 2010 *Dan David Prize* for literature and had accepted an invitation to receive the award at an international symposium at Tel Aviv University this May.

Shortly after learning this, on behalf of VTJP, Shapiro wrote to Atwood, as well as to Amitov Ghosh, the 2010 co-recipient of the *Dan David Prize* for literature. She asked them to refuse the \$1,000,000 award, which they are to share, in solidarity with the global, nonviolent BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) movement against the Zionist state. The BDS campaign is committed to ending Israel's illegal occupation and colonization of the West Bank and Gaza, enforcing the "right of return" of Palestinian refugees codified in international law, and achieving full equality between Jews and non-Jews in Israel. BDS employs a variety of tactics, including ones aimed at academic and cultural institutions complicit in Israel's occupation and apartheid system. Its efforts are *not* directed at individuals.

Ms. Atwood responded first, and directly, to Kathy Shapiro, which generated additional exchanges between the two, and then between Atwood and Hage. This summary of events and correspondence between VTJP and Atwood is provided as background to the letter written by Mark Hage. It was addressed to Atwood alone because at the time we had yet to hear from Mr. Ghosh, who weighed in on the controversy in a letter dated April 20. Marc Estrin's cogent and eloquent reply, also on behalf of VTJP, is posted below.)

Ms. Atwood's letters to Shapiro and Hage are not included here because VTJP did not secure permission from the author to disseminate them publicly. Ms. Atwood's commentary about the controversy, published on the "[Dialogue with Diversity](#)" website, provides a sample of her views. Mr. Hage regrets that time constraints prevented his lengthy letter from doing justice to all the arguments mounted by Atwood.

We appreciate the fact that Margaret Atwood wrote to and debated Shapiro, Hage, and others on the question of Palestine and BDS. Unfortunately, she has no intention of renouncing the Dan David Prize or of rallying to the cause of BDS. Though an artist of prodigious talent, respected worldwide for her political activism and progressive values, Atwood will not stand at this time with the Palestinian victims of Israel's military assaults and massacres, home demolitions, deportations, extra-judicial assassinations, settlement encroachments, land confiscations, and economic blockades. Nor will she challenge the racial exclusivity and institutionalized discrimination that defines and permeates all aspects of life for non-Jews in the so-called "Jewish state." (She does, in fairness, "sympathize with the very bad conditions the people of Gaza are living through due to the blockade, the military actions, and the Egyptian and Israeli walls." Sympathy, however, is not solidarity, and Atwood's does not translate into opposition to or even condemnation of Israel's occupation policies and its genocidal siege of Gaza.)

Atwood has no stomach for boycotting Israel under any terms. She takes cover behind the baseless assertion that VTJP and the BDS movement are asking her to boycott individuals and, thus, obstruct freedom of expression. She writes: "Dan David is a living person, not a state." Atwood also charges, mistakenly, that VTJP and its compatriots wrongly "equate individuals with governments of their countries."

That Mr. David is a "living person" is, obviously, true. It is also true that he was a member of a Zionist youth movement during his adolescence in Romania and has cultivated deep ties to Israel, where he makes his home for part of each year and has sizeable business interests. He sits proudly, we should add, on the Board of Governors of Tel Aviv University. We note as well that Ms. Atwood (and Mr. Ghosh) will be accepting a major literary prize in the presence of Shimon Peres, the President of Israel and the "father" of Israel's rogue nuclear weapons program.

The Dan David Award ceremony is not your run-of-the-mill literary festival, and, clearly, it is a big deal to both Israel and Mr. David. One can imagine Peres and David waxing eloquent on the universal virtues and lessons of literature in the company of Atwood, Ghosh and the media, and extolling Israel's commitment to cultural advancement, education and artistic freedom—while less than 50 miles to the south, 1.5 million Gazans are ruthlessly punished for the misfortune of being born Palestinian, and for refusing to live on their knees.

On the campus of Israel's flagship university, Dan David, official representatives of the Jewish Sparta of the Middle East and honored Muses will raise their glasses to the written word and creative spirit...but maintain a stony silence, by design, on the unforgiving plight of 4 million Palestinians under military occupation, and the millions more made international refugees by Israeli ethnic cleansing.

Atwood should be smart enough to discern a subplot here, but, so far, she has convinced herself that accepting the Dan David Award does not confer legitimacy on Israel and its brutal occupation. She interprets her acceptance of the honor as representing potentially something enlightened or at least politically benign; a prelude perhaps to a deeper engagement that forges channels of dialogue and creates spaces where artists, intellectuals, ordinary citizens, and elected officials might explore promising concepts of conflict resolution and co-existence between Jew and Arab.

For Atwood and those who share her perspective, Israel/Palestine is an arena of conflict contested by equally deserving victims, who, ultimately, need to get over their fears and learn to share. Nobody is in the wrong, or everybody is in the wrong to the same degree

or thereabouts. The devastating reality of life under siege, Israel's flagrant disregard and contempt for international law, the abject horror and injustice of the occupation—all 43 years of it and no end in sight—is negated by the pursuit of a mysterious grail of mutual understanding and trust that, presumably, ends at the negotiation table, with both sides sufficiently appeased and emboldened to make necessary sacrifices for peace.

Of course, this isn't how Israeli power works in the real world, radically committed as it is to the preservation of Jewish political, demographic and military supremacy between the Mediterranean and Jordan. As someone who claims to have been the target of "witch hunts" in the past for her politics and writing, who is well read and educated, and who has traveled extensively to different conflict zones, Atwood should be familiar by now with the machinations of duplicitous governments and regimes of occupation.

Among the most surprising and disappointing of Atwood's statements is her assertion that she is powerless to change the status quo in Israel/Palestine. In the aforementioned open letter posted on the "Dialogue with Diversity" website, she wrote, "*I certainly have no power to influence these events.*" She made a similar statement to Mark Hage. Atwood did say, privately and publicly, that she intends to assess the situation in Israel/Palestine when she travels to Tel Aviv. Good for her. But this effort will be undertaken *in conjunction* with her acceptance of the Dan David Prize. Respectfully, it would be wiser and more courageous of her (and Ghosh) to follow the lead of Naomi Klein, who spoke to Israelis on their own turf without rancor or insult, but pulled no punches when deconstructing the occupation and declaring her support for BDS. Here is a Canadian writer and activist who refused to kiss the ring of the occupier when visiting the Zionist state.

Frederick Douglass, the 19th-century African-American abolitionist and writer, counseled that "Power concedes nothing without a demand." That admonition has stood the test of time. Nelson Mandela echoed Douglass' insight when he wrote, "The authorities do not undergo changes of heart because they have suddenly become kindly men. Everything they have done, every concession they have made, is under pressure of one sort or another."

When the occupation ends, and a just peace comes to Israel/Palestine, it will be the fruit of a determined, strategically bold and tactically resilient struggle against military occupation, Jewish settler-colonialism and Zionism. The non-violent BDS campaign is, and will remain, in the vanguard of that struggle, with or without Margaret Atwood's support. It is our hope that she will join this international movement. But if not, as a consequence in part of the e-mail communications initiated by Kathy Shapiro, when the day of liberation comes—for Jews and Palestinians both—Atwood will not be able to feign ignorance of the crimes against humanity that were perpetrated for decades in occupied Palestine. She will not be able to say, "I did not know."

Mark Hage
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