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ABOUT THE COVER

Ben Gurion University lecturer Dr. Neve Gordon has drawn fire for his article in the *LA Times* calling for a boycott of Israel. Dr. Gordon maintains that his controversial point of view reflects a love of Israel and a desire for peace.

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ISRAEL BOYCOTT DEBATE

Firestorm in academia

By Benjamin Joffe-Walt

(TML)—When Neve Gordon, an influential and widely published lecturer at Israel's Ben Gurion University, suggested earlier this month that the international community boycott Israel, it created a firestorm in the academic community.

The university's president was then quoted as calling on Dr. Gordon, the tenured chair of the university's political science department, to resign, leading to a wave of commentary from supporters and detractors that has raged on ever since.

But in an interview with The Media Line, Ben Gurion University President Rivka Carmi denied media reports that she had called for Dr. Gordon's resignation. "I never called on him to resign," she insisted. "I said if somebody feels so bad about the place where he lives and works he might want to explore some other possibilities.

"When we realized that this article had been published, our first action was to disengage the university from the contents of the article and make sure that the world knew that Dr. Gordon was presenting his personal view which has nothing to do with his academic affiliation," she said.

The university president said she had defended Dr. Gordon on many occasions and argued Ben Gurion fostered an open environment for the exchange of ideas.

"The university is a very pluralistic institution... I cannot overemphasize how important it is to Ben Gurion University, as it is to other universities all over the world, to cherish free speech, free opinion and of course academic freedom.

"If he had done it as just an individual without any affiliation, it would definitely hurt, but I wouldn't consider this as crossing a line," she said. "He can go to Hyde Park and talk

about whatever he wants. That's freedom of speech."

"We have been defending Dr. Gordon's right to express his ideas and opinions—sometimes very extreme—as much as everybody else," Carmi added. "He never talked about boycotts.

"Boycotting Israel is something very, very extreme," she continued. "The line was crossed by him using his affiliation with the university to promote a very extreme type of personal idea, which at the end of the day is damaging the university, not only in terms of potential financial support by donors, who absolutely do not appreciate these type of opinions, but also in terms of his colleagues and the reputation of the institution in general."

But Carmi denied her censure of Dr. Gordon had been influenced by protest from university funders.

"My comment was made because of what I thought was already very damaging to the university and made before I got one comment from donors," she insisted. "Obviously, later on, I got tons of them."

The university president argued that as a department head, Dr. Gordon's article risked damaging faculty relations.

"Even in Dr. Gordon's own department there is at least one faculty member who is working very hard against the idea of boycotts in general and especially boycotts against Israel."

Carmi denied allegations that her response to Dr. Gordon's article was driven by politics.

"I'm not going to get into any discussion of the matter itself. My personal view is not of any importance in this case whatsoever; the university doesn't have a view of its own and the content of the article is not the issue," she said. "The issue is that there is an opinion article which is to our perceptions very extreme and is as-

sociated with Ben Gurion University."

Carmi argued it was the medium through which Dr. Gordon chose to publicize his views which so offended the university administration, not the message itself.

"This has nothing to do with academic freedom... I would support every faculty member expressing his or her opinion no matter how extreme it is as long as it is within the academic discourse," she stressed. "If [Dr. Gordon's article] would have been published in an academic journal after going through peer review I would defend it with my life. But obviously, he would have never introduced such an article into a peer reviewed, scientific journal and I would never defend a faculty using the university as a platform to promote his private, personal ideas."

The university president argued that a boycott of Israeli academia would kill the few cooperative initiatives between Israel and the Arab world.

"Boycotting academia is the one action that's going to undermine the very few, delicate projects and avenues that we still have between Israelis and Arabs," she stressed. "The only [collaborative] few projects that go on, especially in Ben Gurion University but the other universities as well, on various important issues—health, education, water, energy—are being done in universities. Boycotting academia will kill a lot of this."

In an interview with The Media Line, Dr. Neve Gordon denied having called for an academic boycott of Israel.

"At this point I did not call for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions," he said. "I support a gradual boycott that is sensitive to context and circumstance."

Dr. Gordon said he supported boycotting companies with business interests in the Palestinian territories and "a boycott

of Ariel college, that is an academic institution that was built in the occupied territories.

"That would be the first stage," he added. "If that does not work, my second stage would be to support divestment from companies that support the occupation in a visible manner: let's say a company that is creating the separation barrier."

Dr. Gordon said that while he expected strong disagreement, he was surprised by the university president's reaction.

"I didn't expect the President to like the article, in fact I was sure she would not like the article," he said. "I'm sure that most of my colleagues at Ben Gurion University and Israeli universities at large are against my position and indeed 99 percent of the Jewish population is probably against my position.

"Being against my position and saying that my position is wrong and that my position is even reprehensible, in my view, is absolutely within their rights and as the president of the university it might even be what her job calls her to do," Dr. Gordon said.

"But between that and saying Neve [Gordon] should look for a job in a different country, quoting people that called me a traitor and saying that I will lead to the demise of Ben Gurion University, I think that's a witch hunt," he warned.

"I actually expected her to say that she disagrees with me and thinks I'm very wrong, but to say that she will protect academic freedom in her institution because that is her primary role as the president of a leading academic institution."

Dr. Gordon, who once wrote articles opposing the academic boycott of Israel, said he changed his mind gradually from a feeling that decades of peace efforts had failed.

"I've been thinking about my history in the Israeli peace camp: years and years of

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