

Rivka Baker Keusch

Position: The Third Narrative Intern

Organization: Ameinu

Supervisor: Gideon Aronoff

Dates: June 16, 2015 – Sept. 14, 2015

## Rosenberg Foundation Internship Program: My Summer at Ameinu

### Overview

Thanks to the Rosenberg Foundation, I was able to intern at Ameinu, a progressive Zionist organization. I was asked to manage the day-to-day operations of The Third Narrative, an initiative of Ameinu that provides materials and assistance for pro-Israel progressives. The Third Narrative asserts that one can be anti-Occupation while being anti-BDS (the Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions Movement against Israel). I communicated with students, professors, Hillel staff, and community members who were looking for progressive answers to fight against BDS, researched BDS tactics, assisted the Third Narrative-affiliated academic groups the Alliance for Academic Freedom and Scholars for Israel and Palestine, and updated the Third Narrative website. I also learned how to counter the arguments of BDS supporters with concrete information and reasoning, how to promote alternatives to BDS both on and off campus, and how a non-profit can facilitate a broader discussion of these issues.

### New Materials Research

The Third Narrative Initiative began in 2008 with the publication of *The Third Narrative: Progressive Answers to the Far Left's Critiques of Israel*. This free booklet provides responses for specific attacks against Israel, including claims that Zionism is racist and colonialist, that Israel is an apartheid state, and that Israel participates in ethnic cleansing.. Many students told

me they wished they had known about the booklet earlier, as it would have been useful opposing previous BDS initiatives on their campuses. Faculty and Hillel staff told me that the booklet was useful for students who wanted nuanced information on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or BDS. Because the BDS movement has added new tactics and slogans since 2008, I helped Dan Fleshler, co-founder of the Third Narrative, research the BDS movement in order to update the booklet and create other materials.

The Third Narrative is one of many programs producing materials to fight BDS. The Israel Action Network released a new Campus Resource Guide this fall, and the Third Narrative was given an advance copy. We did not want to duplicate the IAN's document, but hoped our materials might act as a supplement. I noticed that the guide does not explain how the goals of the BDS movement are anti-Israel, or demonstrate how one of them — guaranteeing the right of return for Palestinians— will lead to the elimination of the Jewish state. The guide also does not provide alternatives to BDS or suggestions for how to proactively, rather than defensively, fight BDS. Additionally, it does not address how the BDS movement advocates for anti-normalization, which calls for an end to all interactions between Israelis and Palestinians that do not subscribe to the goals of the BDS movement, and how anti-normalization policies are used by BDS advocates outside of Israel. The guide also does not explain why US aid goes to Israel, or rebut claims that the current government of Israel is solely responsible for failure to achieve a two-state solution. Many of these topics will be addressed by future Third Narrative materials, based on my research.

I also investigated other aspects of BDS. By going through the social media accounts and websites of three Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) chapters, I looked at the rhetoric SJP uses. I specifically looked for ways SJP chapters align themselves with other social justice

movements; for example, by making a false equivalency between the actions of the IDF and the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, SJP chapters assert that the Palestinian struggle is an extension of the oppression the Black Lives Matter movement fights to end. I also researched how the BDS movement promotes a policy of anti-normalization, both between Israelis and Palestinians and on campus between pro-Palestinian and Zionist groups. Many SJP chapters refuse to co-host or even attend events with Zionists, and some SJP members have alluded to formal anti-normalization policies in their chapter that prevent them from attending events with pro-Israel groups. The anti-Zionism policies often extend to include apolitical Jewish student organizations, such as Hillel, due to their support of Israel's existence as a Jewish state. I also collected quotes by Palestinians, Arab-Israelis, and prominent members of the progressive community about how BDS is ineffective and unfairly targets Israel, and I researched how extreme organizations on both the left and the right stifle conversation and cause young Zionists to avoid pro-Israel work. My findings will help Dan Fleshler create fact sheets that will supplement the original Third Narrative booklet.

#### Alliance for Academic Freedom Research

The Alliance for Academic Freedom and Scholars for Israel and Palestine consist of over 150 college professors and independent scholars who are committed to the Third Narrative's belief that one can be progressive and anti-BDS. Over the summer, Historians Against the War, a group founded initially to protest the Iraq War in 2003, announced its plans to propose a BDS resolution at the American Historical Association's annual conference in January. The Executive Committee of the Alliance for Academic Freedom authorized an advertisement that would run in the American Historical Association's monthly newsletter *Perspectives on History* (circulation 15,000) to counter a Historians Against the War advertisement publicizing its resolution. I

worked with Avi Weinrab of the Israel Action Network to ready the advertisement and submit it for publication.

For the advertisement, I documented how other Western countries and other US allies (let alone Palestinian bodies and other Middle Eastern countries) have violated academic freedom in more significant ways than Israel's alleged transgressions. We wanted to demonstrate why calls for an academic boycott of Israel unfairly discriminate against Israel. My research was incorporated into the ad.

### Reflection

My internship at the Third Narrative was invaluable to my development as a pro-Israel student. My research into the on-campus BDS movement has been helpful to me since my return to university in the fall. I know how SJP operates on a national scale, and I have learned how the BDS movement tailors its arguments to appeal to progressive students. I have also seen how BDS plays out in other spheres, such as national academic bodies, and have a greater grasp of how organizations in the American Jewish community operate. I am very grateful to the Rosenberg Foundation for funding my experience at Ameinu, which has been a stepping stone in allowing me to pursue further progressive, pro-Israel work.