



Vermonters for Justice in Palestine

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Peace and Justice Center, 60 Lake Street, 1C, Burlington, VT 05401

Open letter to Burlington Mayor and Councilors and Burlington Rabbis

Open letter to: Miro Weinberger, Mayor of Burlington City, Councilors Zoraya Hightower, Max Tracy, Joe Magee, Sarah E Carpenter, William "Chip" Mason, Karen Paul, Ali N Dieng, Jane Stromberg, Perri Freeman, Jack Hanson, Mark Barlow, Joan Shannon and Burlington Rabbis Amy Small, Jan Salzman, David Edleson, Yitzchok Raskin.

From: Vermonters for Justice in Palestine

CC: Governor Phil Scott, Attorney General TJ Donovan, Senator Bernie Sanders, Congressman Peter Welch, Senator Patrick Leahy, Burlington Free Press, Seven Days, Vermont Digger, Boston Globe, New York Times, Washington Post, Mondoweiss, AntiWar.com, Intercept and Counterpunch.

Endorsed by: Kairos USA, The Episcopal Peace Fellowship, Islamic Society of Vermont, Decolonized Burlington, Vermont AFL-CIO, Will Miller Social Justice Lecture Series, Students for Justice in Palestine (UVM), Old Dog Documentaries (Woodstock, Vermont), Community Voices for Immigrants Rights (CVIR). Rabbi Michael Davis, Evanston, IL
Burt Jacobson, Founding Rabbi, Kehilla Community Synagogue, Piedmont, CA

Subject: Vermont, 2021, A Year of Resolutions and Actions Concerning Liberation of Palestinians from Israeli Apartheid.

The Boycott, Divestment and Sanction movement ([BDS](#)) has been promoted by Palestinians since 2005, in the belief that ending business ties with Israel is the most effective way to end its illegal military occupation of Palestinian lands, to force it to recognize Palestinians as equals, and to allow Palestinian refugees to return to the homes that they were forced to leave in 1948 and 1967. However, many efforts to promote BDS and to advocate for the human rights of Palestinian people have been met with angry, emotional, misleading rhetoric, and completely unfounded accusations of antisemitism.

During the year 2021, the Palestinian-Israeli issue has increasingly gained attention in many public spaces in Vermont and throughout the U.S.

As you know, on Sept. 13th 2021, Burlington city councilors considered a [resolution](#) to endorse the use of BDS to pressure Israel to end its decades-long occupation of Palestinian territories. After a long, heated, public debate, the resolution's lead sponsor, Councilor Ali Dieng, moved to withdraw the measure and send it back to a council subcommittee for further consideration. His motion passed 6-5.

Councilor Dieng's decision to withdraw the resolution from public debate was apparently the result of public and private emotional response and harassment by supporters of Israeli policies, and diversionary [accusations](#) of divisiveness by [Mayor Weinberger, and](#) rabbis from Vermont

and elsewhere. Those who came to the microphone to attack the resolution used every justification possible to oppose BDS, including arguments evoking the horror of the Holocaust, antisemitism, and blanket condemnation of Palestinian missiles launched by Hamas, largely in self-defense. It is deeply disturbing to see the history of antisemitism in Europe used by the rabbis as justification for their opposition to BDS, and in support of Jews inflicting violence and terror on Palestinians.

Boycotts and advocacy for social justice have a central role in American social progress and in ending Apartheid in South Africa.

In 2021, after years of pressure from [Vermonters for Justice in Palestine](#) and others, Ben & Jerry's made a courageous decision to begin the process of terminating ice cream sales in the occupied territories -- a sign that awareness of the policies of illegal occupation by the Israeli government and settlers is reaching a critical point.

Also, during its annual convention on November 4th, 2021, the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont passed [three resolutions](#) similar to the resolution debated by the Burlington City Council: to put pressure on Israel to end apartheid and its illegal occupation of Palestinian territories. The resolutions addressed:

1. Freedom of Speech and the Right to Boycott;
2. Application of the Leahy Laws to Israel;
3. Naming Israel's policies as apartheid.

Beyond Vermont, in July 2021, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ (UCC) overwhelmingly [condemned Israeli apartheid](#), becoming the first mainstream denomination to use the term. The action was likened to the stand the UCC took against South African apartheid in 1989. Israel's apartheid was termed a sin against God and God's children. The extensive complicity of the U.S. government in supporting Israeli oppression of Palestinians was identified as a further reason for American churches to speak out.

In late October, 2021, the largest official Protestant association of churches released "[Focus: Palestine](#)," a digital textbook that places the Israeli occupation of Palestine in historical, political, and theological contexts. The compilation is published by the World Communion of Reformed Churches, which represents 232 denominations and 100 million members.

On November 29th, 2021 (the UN-declared International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People), Mayor Kenney and other elected leaders [celebrated](#) Philadelphia's first International Palestinian Day without backlash.

Apartheid in Israel

In 2021, in its detailed 213-page [report](#), *A Threshold Crossed: Israel Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution*, Human Rights Watch examined Israel's treatment of Palestinians and the present-day reality of a single authority, the Israeli government, that governs the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. The area is populated by two groups of roughly equal size, namely, Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. The report found that the Israeli government methodically privileges Jewish Israelis while it represses Palestinians, and does so most severely in the occupied territories.

Also in 2021, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights (B'Tselem) [declared](#): "This is Apartheid: The Israeli Regime enacts in all the territory it controls (Israeli sovereign territory,

East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip) an apartheid regime. One organizing principle lies at the base of a wide array of Israeli policies: advancing and perpetuating the supremacy of one group - Jews - over another - Palestinians.”

Our Appeal to you:

That resolutions on international matters are appropriate for Burlington citizens has been shown several times in the past. Examples include our South Africa boycott, official Sister City status with Bethlehem/Arad established in 1991 when Peter Clavelle was Mayor, and planting, along with Hiroshima survivors, of a peace pole in English and Japanese on the grounds of City Hall itself. Passing a City Council resolution condemning Israel’s behavior in Palestine is consistent with this history.

The endorsers of this letter therefore ask the Mayor, and the City Councilors of Burlington to join the growing movement among progressives in the U.S. to do the right thing, and formally condemn Israeli apartheid.

As American taxpayers, we are all complicit in the daily atrocities committed by the Israeli military against Palestinians. We need a way to act non-violently on behalf of the Palestinian people to improve their lot; implementing BDS is such a way. Burlington could be the first city in the US to pass a resolution declaring Israel’s current practices as apartheid while advocating for freedom of speech and the right to boycott.

In Vermont, Ben & Jerry’s and the Episcopal church have done their part in researching the facts and gathering support; it is now time for the City Council to look again at the previously submitted resolution, and stand up to the powerful Zionist lobby, asserting that criticism of the illegal policies of Israel’s government is not antisemitic.

Links cited in this letter:

<https://bdsmovement.net/>

https://vtjp.org/BurlingtonResolution_SolidarityWith_the_PalestinianPeople_Draft26Aug2021.pdf

<https://vtdigger.org/2021/09/09/four-rabbis-a-joint-letter-to-burlington-city-council-about-bds-vote/>

<https://www.burlingtonvt.gov/Press/mayor-miro-weinberger-statement-on-upcoming-city-council-resolution>

<https://icecream.vtjp.org/>

<https://vtjp.org/EpiscopalResolutions.pdf>

<https://www.ucc.org/synod-delegates-approve-resolution-decrying-oppression-of-palestinian-people/>

<https://werc.ch/justice/palestine>

<https://www.inquirer.com/opinion/commentary/palestine-solidarity-philadelphia-progressive-politics-20211130.html>

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>

<https://www.btselem.org/topic/apartheid>