



16 September 2019

Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng
Vice Chancellor
University of Cape Town

Dear Professor Phakeng

It has come to our attention that a letter bearing several dozen signatures and entitled 'South African Jews support the Academic Boycott of Israeli Universities Enabling the Occupation' was sent to all members of the UCT Senate last Friday. The intention of those responsible is presumably to foster the impression that since some people of Jewish origin endorse an academic boycott against Israel, this view enjoys widespread support in the Jewish community.

That a certain (exceedingly small) percentage of South Africans of Jewish origin supports the boycotters' position is not to be wondered at. Like any community, Jews are not homogenous, but include within its ranks people with views ranging from the far left to the far right of the ideological spectrum. However, to focus exclusively on the position espoused by a what is clearly a fringe group, whether relating to the Israel-Palestine question or any other issue where a range of different opinions exist, is misleading and disingenuous. What it does is accord to that faction a degree of credibility that is demonstrably not in accordance with the facts on the ground.

There can be no reasonable doubt that the vast majority of South African Jews are strenuously opposed to singling out Israeli academic institutions for special punitive action of this nature. So far as they are concerned, the initiative is entirely politically and ideologically motivated, driven not by human rights concerns as is being claimed, but by hard-line anti-Israel activists. This is demonstrated by the unambiguous standpoint of all of the community's leading communal bodies, including the SA Jewish Board of Deputies, its acknowledged democratically elected body. It is also shown by the results of an online petition currently being run by the SA Zionist Federation, which to date well over 64 000 people have endorsed. While not all of those signatories are Jewish, it is logical to assume that a substantial proportion, if not the majority, of them are. That tens of thousands of Jews have come out against the boycott compared with the paltry few dozen who support it tells its own story. One could further point to the results of two academic surveys conducted by UCT's own Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research. Both of these surveys showed that whereas close to 90% of respondents expressed strong or moderate support for Israel, only 1% expressed negative feelings. A similar proportion of respondents identified anti-Israel prejudice as a genuine problem facing South African Jewry.

In view of these realities, we believe that the letter received by the Senate deliberately conveyed a highly skewed depiction of how Jewish South Africans feel about the matter in question. To correct this misperception, we request that this letter be sent to the members of Senate so that they can better understand where the Jewish community stands.

Regards

Shaun Zagnoev
National Chairman