

The Natalie Portman Controversy

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Natalie Portman, the Israeli-born American Oscar-award-winning actress, announced that she will not appear in person to accept the *Genesis Prize*. This prize, which *Time* magazine dubbed the “Jewish Nobel,” was established five years ago with a \$100 million endowment. The stated purpose of the prize, which gives the winner a million dollars to spend on the charities of his or her choice, is “to celebrate Jewish achievement and contribution to society.” Past winners include Michael Bloomberg and Michael Douglas.

Though last November Portman agreed to receive the award, last week on *Yom Ha’atzmaut* (Israel Independence Day) Portman’s representative told the Genesis Prize foundation “Recent events in Israel have been extremely distressing to her and she does not feel comfortable participating in any public events in Israel.” Portman’s representative added that “she cannot in good conscience move forward with the ceremony.” Portman herself explained on Instagram, “I chose not to attend [the Genesis Prize Ceremony] because I did not want to appear as endorsing [Israeli Prime Minister] Benjamin Netanyahu, who was to be giving a speech at the ceremony. By the same token, I am not part of the BDS

(Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement and do not endorse it. Like many Israelis and Jews around the world, I can be critical of the leadership in Israel without wanting to boycott the entire nation.” How Portman can claim not to be boycotting Israel and yet refuse to participate in any public events in Israel defies logic. Regardless, Portman continued by stating “But the mistreatment of those suffering from today’s atrocities is simply not in line with my Jewish values. Because I care about Israel, I must stand up against violence, corruption, inequality, and abuse of power.”

At first glance it appears that Portman is performing the Torah’s command (Lev. 19:17) not to stand by idly while your fellow sins, but to “reprove your fellow“(though Portman never actually specified what she finds troubling about Israel actions). We should be concerned about the sins of our fellow and the nation as a whole, for *B’nei Yisrael* (the Children of Israel) are warned that if they contaminate the land by sinning they will be dislodged from the land (Lev. 18: 24-25). Rashi explains this with a parable. He compares *Eretz Yisrael* (the land of Israel) to a refined prince. If the prince eats disgusting food, his refined stomach will not be able to handle it and he will vomit it out. In other words, the pristine Holy Land will not tolerate unholy behavior. Portman’s admonishments could be understood as a warning to Israel to clean up its act before the biblical warning comes true and the people are again dislodged from the land.

So, were Portman's actions justified? Absolutely NOT! Portman, who speaks of "Jewish values," should be aware of the value of *Machloket L'shem Shamayim* (an argument for the sake of heaven). Such an argument is one in which the disputants are not concerned with winning the argument but discovering the truth. Therefore, one can vehemently disagree with another while still acknowledging the other's good intentions and integrity, because he too desires to arrive at the truth. Once you acknowledge the good intentions of one with whom you disagree, it becomes much more difficult to vilify him. Though the Houses of Hillel and Shammai rigorously disputed with each other, their sons and daughters married because all realized the arguments were for the sake of heaven. In other words, they did not boycott each other despite their disagreements. Portman's actions are being lauded by BDS activists because these actions understandably are being seen as a boycott of the Jewish State.

While I strongly believe Jews outside of Israel should refrain from publicly criticizing Israel, others disagree with me and we can agree to disagree. However, Ms. Portman is not only criticizing Israel but boycotting Israel while giving ammunition to BDS activists.

Boycotting your own family, and by that I mean *Am Yisrael* (the nation of Israel), is cruel, dangerous, and fractious. As David fled Jerusalem because his son Absalom led a coup against him, according to rabbinic lore David wrote *Ashrei* (Psalm 145) praising God. Why would David write a psalm praising God at such a time of

distress? Would it have not been more appropriate for him to author a psalm beseeching God for aid? The rabbis teach that David realized that the coup was punishment for his sin with Bat Sheva. Therefore, David reasoned that God still cared enough about him to punish him, and this brought David joy. David did not fear divine punishment; what he did fear was God abandoning him and in essence saying to him, “Look, buddy, you’re beyond hope and on your own. Don’t expect any more help from me.” In other words, David was happy that God was not boycotting him.

In a healthy relationship people don’t boycott each other just because they disagree. If that were the case, all spouses would be boycotting each other. Ms. Portman, you don’t have to like Israeli policy, but you should treat your quarrels with Israel’s leaders as an argument for the sake of heaven and allow for the possibility that they genuinely believe their actions are necessary to safeguard Israeli lives. Ms. Portman, you don’t boycott those you truly care about.