

At a 2014 Annual General Meeting (AGM) last week, Ryerson University's student union joined a number of other provincial student unions — 10, according to organizers — in voting “overwhelmingly in favour” of supporting a boycott, divestment and sanctions policy (BDS) against Israel.

The resolution is largely symbolic, giving the unions moral authority to pester administrations to cut commercial and academic ties with Israel, but no power to force their hand. Still, naive observers cannot be faulted for assuming that where there is smoke, there is fire. There is fire, to be sure, but it is the fire of hatred, not truth, that produced this toxic resolution.

To date, Canadian administrations have commendably resisted such pressure in unequivocal terms. “The university does not support a boycott,” said Ryerson spokesman Michael Forbes. “We don't support divestment, nor do we support sanctions against Israel. We've been consistent on this point.” Heartening for today, but will another administration elsewhere cave in tomorrow?

When the BDS movement began in the 1980s in an organized way, the leaders were small radical cells of pro-Palestinian activists, human rights NGOs and Western (plus some Israeli) academics. The Oslo peace process banked BDS fires, but the Camp David failure, the Second Intifada of 2000 and the 2001 Durban I conference stoked them anew in an overtly anti-Semitic version. It made good headway in the U.K. and Europe, but not North America, where friendliness to Israel flourishes.

But on campus, unfriendliness to Israel flourishes. The Jewish community's Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) has publicly protested campus Israel show-trials like BDS and Israel Apartheid Week, but CIJA — and campus Hillel centres in North America — have so far been loath to mix it up with Israel-haters in a muscular way. Indeed, many Hillel centres in the U.S. remain not only neutral, but often complicit with anti-Zionist activism as a matter of policy in the name of “outreach.”

Outreach! The famous (and by now ridiculous) Jewish obsession with “fairness” frequently dissolves into self-destructive parody. For example, anti-leftist crusader David Horowitz was attacked by Hillel rabbis at Yale University, the University of North Carolina, the University of California (Santa Barbara) and the University of Florida for alleged Islamophobia. Horowitz's crime was to suggest Hillels impose two conditions for Jewish outreach to potential Palestinian interlocutors: suspension of participation in Israel Apartheid Week and public support for Israel's right to exist. Hardly the stuff of hate speech. So only pathological altruism can explain the rabbis' refusal to champion Jewish political honour over deference to progressive shibboleths.

Advocates for Israel, and especially student activists trying to push back against organized hatred have their work cut out for them. Their worst enemies lie without shame. Their natural protectors like CIJA prefer to “lead from behind.” And so many Jewish intellectuals and academics have cast their lot in with Israel's enemies that it creates confusion amongst open-minded, but lightly-informed observers, for whom the Middle East situation remains an inchoate quagmire of conflicting claims and wildly disparate narratives.

One thing is clear: Meekness is not working.

There is a hopeful sign of healthy realism in the election of Eric Fingerhut to the presidency of Hillel International in 2013. Fingerhut has instituted guidelines that proscribe speakers who engage in “demonization, delegitimization or applying double standards to Israel,” or who support BDS. Philadelphia's Swarthmore College challenged the ruling, declaring their centre an “Open Hillel.” Fingerhut sent a measured but implacable response, affirming the right of Israel demonizers to appear elsewhere on campus, but not at Hillel centres. He wrote: “Just as the university decides who will teach classes, and what organizations it will allow on campus, so Hillel will decide who will lead discussions in

programs it sponsors and with whom it will partner.”

In his book, Foucault’s Pendulum, Umberto Eco writes: “If two things don’t fit, but you believe both of them, thinking at somewhere, hidden, there must be a third thing that connects them, that’s credulity.” Anti-Zionists believe the Jews have no right to their historic homeland. They also believe Palestinians have a right to the Jewish homeland. They are credulous, because they refuse to look at the “hidden thing” that allows them to connect the two things that don’t fit. The hidden thing is anti-Semitism. Make no mistake: BDS is the new “final solution.”