

With a Song in the Heart of Israel

by Michael Curtis



Pop icon Madonna performs at the Ramat Gan stadium near Tel Aviv on May 31, 2012. (photo credit: Ariel Schalit/AP)

Without a song the day would never end, the road would never bend. In the purple dusk of twilight time, the music is a beautiful melody that haunts one's reverie. Yet, the news that the Eurovision song contest (Eurovision) will be held in Tel Aviv, Israel, has produced an outcry from the usual suspects, unrelenting hostile towards the State of Israel. Participants in the annual contest, more than 50 countries, primarily but not confined to members of the European Broadcasting Union, submit an original song to be performed on live TV or over the radio. The contest has been won three times by Israel since it first participated in it in 1973.

In 2018 the contest held in Lisbon was won by Netta Barzilai

of Israel who performed in unconventional dress her song *Toy*, accompanied by her chicken dance, a song of female independence which she said was influenced by the #MeToo movement and women searching for and finding their voices. According to rules of the contest, Israel was therefore entitled to host the 2019 contest on May 18, 2019 in which 49 countries will participate. It is expected to attract 20,000 tourists, and among the performers will be Madonna who has appeared a number of times in Israel. The original intention of Israeli authorities was to hold it in Jerusalem, but in view of political controversy over the city, the government compromised and agreed it would be held in Tel Aviv.

The Israeli symbol of the contest is formed by a union of three triangles, to emphasize the power of union and harmony of diverse elements. However, the usual subjects, refusing to accept this gesture of goodwill, began a campaign to prevent Israel being the host country, using a number of open letters in the British newspaper, *The Guardian*. Though no objective individual is likely to perceive any logical connection between songs stealing across the meadows of one's heart in Tel Aviv performed by artists from many countries on one hand and unrelated Israeli public policy, the critics insist the basic issue for removing the Eurovision Contest from Israel is systematic violation of Palestinian human rights, land theft evictions, shootings, beatings and worse by security forces. On September 7, 2018, *The Guardian* published a letter from 141 "artists from Europe," calling for the contest be moved from Israel. Apparently, somewhere there's music, however faint the tune, but not in Israel.

A second letter, signed by 50 people and published by *The Guardian* on January 29, 2019, called on the BBC not to cover in any broadcast the contest in Israel. The BBC had planned on February 2019 to screen a program, "You Decide," a discussion of the Eurovision event. The signatories called for Eurovision to be relocated to a country where "crimes against freedom of

expression are not being committed.”

To its credit the BBC, rejected this call, stating that Eurovision is not a political event and does not endorse any political message or campaign. The host country is determined by the rules of Eurovision competition not by the BBC.

It might be useful to indicate some of the usual suspects, starting with the well-known critics of Israel: rock singer Roger Waters, formerly of Pink Floyd, who seems to have made a second career out of anti-Israeli activity, and film makers Mike Leigh and Ken Loach and playwright Caryl Churchill. It is more surprising and inexplicable to find unexpected public figures: Julie Christie, co-star of Doctor Zhivago, Maxine Peake, TV actress, fashion designer Vivienne Westwood, and publisher Carmen Callil, co-founder in 1793 of Virago, feminist publishing house.

The critics can be accused of being disingenuous, and as British Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis has remarked are conducting a campaign of division and demonization. No protests about violations of human rights were uttered when the hosts of Eurovision were Russia in 2009, and Azerbaijan in 2012. The usual suspects are relentless towards Israel. They succeeded in 2017 in pressuring the New Zealand singer Lorde to cancel her concert in Tel Aviv, the argument as usual being that performing in Tel Aviv would be seen as giving support to the government, though her connection with Benjamin Netanyahu is somewhat remote.

It is worth examining the fulminations of the elite critics in *The Guardian* in the context of popular opinion. A recent 2017 study by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research is helpful. This study in Britain of 4,005 people aged 16 and over reported on the attitudes to two issues: one was whether Israel was an “apartheid” state, had a legal system of segregation and discrimination enforced by Jews on Palestinians, a system parallel to that in South Africa,

1948-1994; the second was whether Israel should be subject to a boycott, as advanced by BDS, created 2005 for economic and cultural boycott of Israel. The two themes are separate, but they are interrelated. It is probable, if not always true, that an advocate of the boycott of Israeli goods and products is antisemitic.

The 2007 survey showed that 21% of those questioned thought Israel was an apartheid state, and 5% strongly thought so, while only 18% thought it was not apartheid. On the second issue of whether Israel should be subject to a boycott on BDS lines, 10% agreed, and 3% strongly agreed, that people should boycott Israeli goods and products, while 47% opposed a boycott.

A number of points can be made. First, of those surveyed more people thought that Israel was an apartheid state than that there should be a boycott. Perhaps an explanation is that boycott is automatically understandable, but "apartheid" is a less familiar term.

Secondly, there was a large number of people who answered Don't Know, DK, to the two questions, 37% about apartheid, and 19% about boycott. Young people were more likely than older people to respond by DK. Also, women were more likely than men to report DK, 45% of women to 28% of men regarding apartheid, and 23% women to 14% men on boycott. A third factor is that the less educated people were more likely to report DK than those with educational qualifications. Yet, education does not appear to have an impact on opinions of those who do know, and the more knowledge people claim to have of Zionism, the more likely they are to express an opinion. Politically, conservatives are more likely to believe that Israel is not apartheid than those who do, and the reverse is true of leftists.

The conclusion from this survey is that most British people either oppose or have no definite view of whether Israel is

apartheid or whether it should be boycotted. The reality is that so many do not know about apartheid. One further conclusion, probable though not categorical, is that agreement that Israel is guilty of apartheid or that it should be boycotted suggests likelihood of antisemitic feelings. The views of the elitists who wrote the letters in *The Guardian* might be discussed in terms of this political and social reality. Meanwhile Eurovision 2019 is a hymn to the grace of Israel.