

# Holy Boycotts

The theological fuel for the divestment campaign gaining momentum in Protestant churches around the world originates in a little-known Christian center in East Jerusalem

Matti Friedman

**P**RECISELY AT THE UNCOMFORTABLE spot where the fault line between Palestinians and Israelis converges with the one between Christians and Jews sits a small East Jerusalem organization called the Sabeel Ecumenical Center for Liberation Theology.

“The Gospel,” says Jonathan Kuttab, who helped found the Sabeel Center in 1989 and sits on its board of directors, “is good news not only for Palestinian Christians, but also for Israelis. God loves everyone. In a region where violence is often done in the name of God, this is very important.”

The Sabeel Center’s message of love, however, and its bucolic name — Arabic for “a spring of water” — don’t explain how this interdenominational group of Palestinian Christians came to be at the center of a fierce political battle waged in religious terms, or how it became a nemesis of the Israeli Foreign Ministry and of Jewish groups abroad. For that, you must look to London, where, on February 5, the General Synod of the Anglican Church voted for what members called “morally responsible investment,” a term that explicitly excluded only stock in companies with ties to Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories. Or to Geneva, where the World Council of Churches — an umbrella body representing different Protestant and Orthodox denominations — urged its members to implement a similar policy last year. Or to Richmond, Virginia, where the Presbyterian Church (USA) general assembly went ahead with “phased divestment” in 2004 (*see box*).

For the Israeli government and Jewish groups concerned about what they see as grave damage to Israel’s international standing, the phrase “morally responsible investment” is a fingerprint leading back to Sabeel. The divestment campaign’s goals may be political — ending Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territory — but it has taken on a Christian form, adopted by mainline, liberal Protestant churches and pushed by Palestinian Christians who often use language explicitly equating the Palestinians with the crucified Jesus and the Israelis with his crucifiers. In a

statement made before Easter in 2001, Rev. Naim Ateek, the Sabeel Center’s director, said, “In this season of Lent, it seems to many of us that Jesus is on the cross again with thousands of crucified Palestinians around Him... The Israeli government crucifixion system is operating daily.”

This convergence of Palestinian nationalism and Christian motifs is what concerns Diaspora groups like the U.S.-based Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Center for Public Affairs (JCPA), as well as the Israeli Foreign Ministry. Sabeel’s theology, says Ethan Felson, the JCPA point man on divestment, “puts the powerless on the cross, with the powerful doing the crucifying. I don’t think it’s necessary to call it theological anti-Semitism. But the language is heavily loaded. Even if the intent isn’t anti-Semitic, it’s wielded as a weapon without regard for the fact that this kind of language has a history.”

Faced with an increasing number of churches following Sabeel’s lead, Israeli officials no longer hesitate to use some heavily loaded language of their own. “We’re seeing the Jewish state singled out for special treatment, and I’m choosing my words carefully,” says Mark Regev, a Foreign Ministry spokesman. “This reminds many of us of the economic boycotts of Jews in Central Europe in the first half of the 20th century. Whatever you think of Israel’s policies on the West Bank, to take these measures while saying nothing about Zimbabwe, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran — you have to ask what’s going on.”

The divestment effort is indeed one-sided, says Kuttab, a prominent East Jerusalem attorney. “Occupation, slavery, oppression — all of those things are one-sided,” he says. “It’s a clear case of right and wrong.” Still, Kuttab stresses that Sabeel condemns all violence. If it could point at a company that was investing in suicide bombings, he says, it would call loudly to divest from it as well. “Find one, and we’ll say the same thing,” Kuttab suggests. “We don’t know of any.”

Kuttab rejects any charges of anti-Semitism. “Our Christianity rejects racism,” he says. “Our criticism of Israel is for its policies that are racist and exclusive.” He warns



against using allegations of anti-Semitism to deflect criticism from Israel, and defends the right of Palestinian Christians to see themselves in their holy texts. “Do we see ourselves in the stories of suffering, of sacrifice, of the Exodus? Yes,” says Kuttab. “Resurrection is central to us, the idea that Christ defeated death by dying. As Palestinians walk through the valley of death, it’s good to remember Christ’s story and its lesson: We will not be oppressed or buried forever.”

**S**ABEEL BEGAN IN 1989 AS AN informal gathering of Palestinian Christians from all local denominations. It is headed by the Anglican Rev. Ateek, formerly the canon of St. George’s Church in East Jerusalem. The center runs youth programs and tries to bring together members of the different dwindling Palestinian Christian groups — who make up only around 2 percent of the Palestinian population — but it is its role as the main proponent of divestment that has been responsible for its prominence. Sabeel has affiliated “Friends of Sabeel” organizations in Canada, the U.S. and Europe.

The catchphrase “morally responsible investment” originates with a Sabeel paper published in April of last year. Written by Ateek, “A Call for Morally Responsible Investment: A Nonviolent Response to the Occupation” has become the central text of the pro-divestment movement. The paper opens with a litany of Israeli wrongs since 1948 and its rejection of any chance of peace, and while it briefly mentions opposition to “all violent acts against civilians,” it never mentions Palestinian violence against Israel. It also draws an explicit apartheid comparison, quoting Oliver Tambo of the African

**ON THE LIST: Sabeel's call for 'morally responsible investment' targets Caterpillar, whose machinery is also helping to build the security barrier in Abu Dis, in East Jerusalem**



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National Congress and Nobel Peace Prize laureate and Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu. "If apartheid ended, so can this occupation," Tutu is quoted by Ateek as saying, "but the moral force and international pressure will have to be just as determined. The current divestment effort is the first, though certainly not the only, necessary move in that direction." In another paper published in the summer of 2002 in the Sabeel newsletter, Cornerstone, Ateek wrote, "Israel is creating Bantustans (homelands, reservations) for the Palestinians and an Israeli form of apartheid that is much worse than what was practiced in South Africa."

In the same paper, Ateek condemns suicide attacks while offering something closely resembling an apology. "If Israel labels them as terrorists," Ateek writes, "they are, after all, the product of its own making." He goes on to compare the suicide bombers to Samson and Israel to the Philistines. "Christ is not in the tanks and jet fighters, fighting on the side of the oppressors (although many Jewish and Christian Zionists believe that)," he writes. "God is in the city of Gaza, in the Jenin camp and in the old city of Nablus, Ramallah, and Bethlehem suffering with the oppressed."

Casting Jews as Biblical oppressors like Philistines or Romans and the Palestinians as the new Jews is a recurring theme in Sabeel's literature. According to Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor, the ADL's interfaith director, underlying this thrust (and the willingness of some mainline Protestant churches to accept it) is a theological disagreement with Judaism about God's relationship with the Jewish people. The mainline Protestant churches, says Bretton-Granatoor, as opposed to Catholics

## Divested

**CHURCH OF ENGLAND:** The Anglican Church is reviewing its investments in companies with ties to Israel's presence in the territories, following a February 5 vote. The church holds \$4.4 million of stock in the heavy-equipment company Caterpillar, which sells bulldozers to the Israeli army.

**PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA):** The largest of the U.S. Presbyterian groups, in June 2004 its general assembly voted 431-62 to divest, and subsequent attempts by pro-Israel Presbyterians to reverse the decision failed. The church holds around \$2.7 million in Caterpillar stock. A further decision on the matter is expected at the next general assembly in June.

**THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES:** The Council, an umbrella group with 347 member denominations, called on its members to give "serious consideration" to pulling investments out of Israel in February 2005. The Council's decisions are non-binding.

**SOUTH AFRICAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES:** With 26 member churches, the council has endorsed an "academic and cultural" boycott of Israel. ●

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and evangelical Christians, have a "scientific" take on the Bible, one that leads them to reject the idea of a covenant between God and the Jews as myth, replacing that covenant with the more universal idea of accepting Jesus in return for salvation. In this narrative, the Jewish people don't have a historical connection to Israel. "When Jews started showing up in Israel in the 1880s, the Protestant missionaries who were already in the Middle East, who had been there since the 1820s, saw it as pure Eastern European colonialism," says Bretton-Granatoor. "In their eyes there was no legitimate historic claim."

Referring to Genesis 12:3, where God makes his covenant with Abraham, Ateek wrote in the winter 2003 issue of Cornerstone: "Genesis 12:3 could directly lead to passages such as Deuteronomy 7:2, where the Israelites were summoned by God to ethnically cleanse and utterly destroy their enemies, i.e., those who have been cursed, namely, the indigenous people of the land, the Canaanites. Such self-righteousness and

arrogance was deeply embedded in the psyche and beliefs of some people and seemed to have surfaced frequently."

For Felson of the JCPA, the acceptance by the mainline Protestant churches of Sabeel's narrative is rooted in their deeply felt pacifism, which again differentiates them from other streams of Christianity. "Sabeel advances a narrative in which the Palestinians are utterly powerless and Israel is all powerful," Felson says, "and these churches believe that if you're the powerful side, you must put down the gun. It's not unsophisticated, but it doesn't play out if your kid is waiting on line to get into a discothèque and it's the last thing he ever does."

In June, the Presbyterian general assembly, which became the first major group to adopt divestment in 2004, will meet again in Birmingham, Alabama for its biennial conference. The divestment initiative will come up for review, and a showdown is brewing. With radical Islamists now in power in the Palestinian territories and Palestinian Christians further marginalized, Sabeel's critics expect the group's rhetoric to increase in volume, as the Christians fight for their place in the Palestinian national story. "I think we'll hear Sabeel becoming more shrill, not less," says Bretton-Granatoor. A Foreign Ministry official, speaking on condition of anonymity, offered a similar assessment: "The Palestinian Christians are under pressure, and they need to be the most hard-line of all in order to guarantee their own position. It reminds one in some ways of the Jews in Europe who emphasized that they had fought for the Fatherland, because they knew they were on thin ice."

Sabeel's Kuttub brushes off the notion that he's driven by fears of an Islamist threat to Palestinian Christians. "This is so far from the truth," he says. "It's a way of avoiding reality. I'm not opposed to the occupation because I'm worried about my own position. I'm opposed to the occupation because it's illegal and it's wrong." Sabeel's critics, he says, might themselves be driven by internal motives of the kind they assign to Sabeel: "Some of these people don't live in Israel and feel guilty about it, and try to make up for it in this way," he suggests.

Israel and its allies, he says, should not be attacking a group that firmly advocates nonviolence. "Boycotts are obviously better than armed struggle," he says. But he doesn't expect the criticism of Sabeel to let up. "The problem is not the language we use, or the fact that we're one-sided," Kuttub says. "The problem is that we resist at all." ●