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## More than just free speech

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## MORE THAN JUST FREE SPEECH by b.h. Yael

On 8 May 2009, the Koffler Centre for the Arts in Toronto publicly "disassociated themselves" from artist Reena Katz by sending letters not only to their mailing list, but to artist-run centres across Canada. Katz' exhibition, titled *each hand as they are called*, curated by Kim Simon and commissioned by the Koffler, was about to open as part of the Luminato festival. *Each hand* was to be a queer weaving of narratives and generative experiences of Kensington Market (<http://eachhand.org/>). The Koffler's act effectively shut down the show.

In the same week in Toronto, B'nai Brith publicly requested of Mayor David Miller the censure and cancellation of a reading of *Seven Jewish Children*, a ten-minute play by British writer Caryl Churchill. The play, written in response to Israel's bombardments of Gaza in January, 2009, addresses various stages of Jewish history, representing Jews as both victims of violence and as perpetrators. It asks how we might talk to our children when we occupy these different positions.

**Being critical of the state of Israel, a political entity, does not constitute an act of anti-Semitism.**

These cultural events are but two in a number of significant attempts, especially since Gaza, to pressure universities, funding bodies, legislatures, arts organizations, and Pride Toronto to disallow, cancel or censor groups and events that have been critical of the state of

Israel. B'nai Brith and other Jewish organizations have been at the forefront of requesting these acts of censorship. Some of the targeted groups or events use the supposedly inflammatory term of "apartheid" (the UN definition supports this usage); some include challenges to Zionism (the recent international conference at York University, *Israel/Palestine: One State or Two?* engaged serious academic evaluation); some, as in the case of Reena Katz, garner attention purely because of political association. Katz' show had nothing to do with Israel/Palestine; it was her association with Israeli Apartheid Week that proved to be sufficient cause for the Koffler and its supporting organization, the United Jewish Appeal, to pull their support. This act was especially egregious as it implies that publicly funded institutions, which the Koffler is, can exclude, target, or censor artists for their political affiliations or public opinions.

The tactic by mainstream Jewish organizations and their allies has been to frame criticisms of Israel as anti-Semitism. At a recent talk at Beit Shalom synagogue, Liberal MP Irwin Cotler emphasized

that the "new anti-Semitism" is not so much about personal discrimination but rather attacks on the "collective of Jews," and that Israel is a representative of this collective. According to Cotler, attacks on Israel using the label of apartheid constitute anti-Semitism in its newest form.

The concerted effort to silence critics may be seen in a number of ways, but the most significant is that this is pure distraction from the real issue at hand: Israel's ongoing and violent 42-year occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. This occupation and the subsequent settlement building stands against international law. As well, Israel's treatment of its own minority of Palestinians (one fifth of the population) renders it not an exclusively Jewish state, which it claims to be. Palestinian rights to live in safety, to access their lands and livelihood, their houses and resources, have been obscured in most mainstream media coverage. But the tide is changing as criticism of Israel has entered public discourse. The pressure brought to bear on arms-length funding bodies or public institutions could well backfire with false charges of anti-Semitism.

This deliberate obfuscation also denies that many Jews reject the idea that Israel speaks for and acts on behalf of world Jewry. Being critical of the state of Israel, a political entity, does not constitute an act of anti-Semitism.

Rather than focusing on the issues at hand, increasingly activists, academics and artists have to expend their energies in defending free speech and political criticism, something we all assume we have a right to express. As regards Israel/Palestine, we need room for two and more narratives; political solutions that address Palestinian dispossession and land theft; and open debate and address of abuses of power.

*Katz and Simon reached a settlement with the Koffler and will be presenting each hand as they are called autonomously in Kensington Market, October 1-25, 2009. The Toronto Arts Council, in reviewing the Koffler's professional and ethical conduct, determined that the Koffler was in violation of the City of Toronto's non-discrimination policy regarding freedom of political association. [www.eachhand.org](http://www.eachhand.org)*

B.H. Yael's most recent video, *Trading the Future* won the Audience Award at the Ecofilms Festival in Rhodes. *Palestine Trilogy* addresses various sites of resistance by Israeli, Palestinian and International activists. Yael is a Professor of Integrated Media in the Faculty of Art at The Ontario College of Art and Design.