



Bringing BDS into the Classroom

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I. Introduction

Recent events have put renewed scrutiny on the academic boycott of Israeli institutions of higher education, particularly on the extent to which the implementation of such a boycott directly harms U.S. students and faculty. In the fall of 2018, a professor and graduate student teaching assistant at the University of Michigan refused to write letters of recommendation for their students wanting to participate in university-approved study abroad programs in Israel, both citing the academic boycott as the reason for their refusal. Two months later, the faculty senate at Pitzer College approved a resolution to shut down their college's study abroad program in Israel that was put forward by a faculty member who is a leading proponent of the academic boycott of Israel. And last May, New York University's Department of Social and Cultural Analysis, whose chair and half of the directors of its affiliated programs have endorsed academic BDS, voted by a large majority to cut all ties with NYU's Tel Aviv program, including by refusing to sponsor faculty teaching in the program or to facilitate faculty exchanges between the department and the program.

A component of the larger anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) and its American counterpart, USACBI, coordinate the implementation of the academic boycott of Israel (academic BDS) in the U.S. and throughout the world. The PACBI/USACBI guidelines call on faculty "to boycott and/or work towards the cancellation or annulment of events, activities, agreements, or projects involving Israeli academic institutions or that otherwise promote the normalization of Israel in the global academy".¹

Such boycott-compliant behaviors include faculty working to shut down their own university's study abroad programs in Israel and refusing to write letters of recommendation for students wanting to study in these programs, as well as attempting to obstruct their own colleagues' research collaborations with Israeli institutions and scholars, and blocking or canceling campus events and educational activities that present Israel in a positive light. All of these actions, when implemented, not only hurt Israeli universities and scholars, they deprive students and faculty on U.S. campuses of scholarly and educational opportunities and impede academic freedom.

Implicit in the PACBI/USACBI guidelines, however, is another form of boycott-compliant behavior that is somewhat less obvious, though no less harmful. The academic boycott's rejection of "the normalization of Israel in the global academy" not only calls on faculty to work towards *boycotting* educational programs in or about Israel, it also encourages them to *develop and implement* academic programming that portrays Israel in a wholly negative light, as an illegitimate state unworthy of normalization.

¹ <https://usacbi.org/guidelines-for-applying-the-international-academic-boycott-of-israel/>

AMCHA Initiative's 2017 study, "The Impact of Academic Boycotters of Israel on U.S. Campuses,"² provided evidence that academic boycotters may indeed be using their own academic departments' public events as venues for such boycott-consistent, anti-normalization efforts. Our study found that departments of Middle East, Ethnic and Women's Studies with one or more faculty members who had expressed public support for an academic boycott of Israel were five to 12 times more likely to sponsor Israel-related lectures and symposia with pro-BDS speakers than departments with no academic boycotters.

In addition, AMCHA's recently released study, "The Harassment of Jewish Students on U.S. Campuses: How Eliminationist Anti-Zionism and Academic BDS Incite Campus Antisemitism,"³ revealed a dramatic increase in faculty participation in academic BDS promotion and implementation and Israel-related antisemitic expression from 2017 to 2018: the number of incidents of academic BDS promotion or attempted implementation involving individual faculty or academic departments nearly quadrupled; the number of events sponsored by academic departments that contained the demonization or delegitimization of Israel increased by 85%; and the number of departmentally-sponsored events at which one or more speakers advocated for or condoned violence against Israel or Israel's elimination nearly tripled.

The current study sought to expand our understanding of how faculty boycotters use academic programming and their faculty positions to implement an academic boycott of Israel by focusing on the extent to which individual faculty boycotters bring their anti-Israel biases into the classroom. Unlike public events such as departmentally-sponsored lectures or symposia, college and university classes are, in general, not open to the public, and it is difficult to know with certainty what is being taught in the classroom and what, if any, biases a course instructor will bring to bear in the teaching of a course. However, course syllabi that present a schedule of required readings and can serve as an objective measure of course content are sometimes publicly accessible on-line or may be shared by students registered in the targeted courses.

This study examined the syllabi of 50 courses focusing on the Palestinian-Israeli or Arab-Israeli conflict that were taught at public and private colleges and universities across the country over an eleven-year period by instructors who had either expressed public support for the academic boycott of Israel or had not expressed public support for either academic BDS or BDS more generally. The study compared the percentages of course readings with pro-BDS authors in these two groups of instructors. We hypothesized that the syllabi of those instructors who had expressed public support for academic BDS would show significantly higher percentages of readings with pro-BDS authors than the syllabi of instructors who had not expressed public support for any form of BDS.

² <https://amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Faculty-Report.pdf>

³ <https://amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Eliminationist-Anti-Zionism-and-Academic-BDS-on-Campus-Report.pdf>

Our findings confirmed our hypothesis, revealing large and highly significant differences between both groups of instructors:

- Academic BDS-supporting instructors had an average of **78%** of their course readings authored by BDS supporters, whereas non-BDS-supporting instructors had an average of **17%** of their course readings authored by BDS supporters.
- The two groups of instructors showed themselves to be qualitatively distinct from one another with respect to the selection of course readings, with almost no overlap of the groups: **all** of the academic BDS-supporting instructors had a majority of their readings authored by BDS supporters, whereas only **2 of the 35** syllabi of non-BDS-supporting instructors had a majority of their course readings authored by BDS supporters, and **none more than 60%**. These data demonstrate that the large quantitative difference between the groups is not just the result of a few outliers, but represents a qualitative difference between these two groups of instructors in terms of how they select course readings.

These results strongly suggest that faculty who support an academic boycott of Israel engage in politically-motivated efforts to implement the anti-normalization component of the boycott in their classrooms, by exposing students to an overwhelming preponderance of authors and readings likely to portray Israel as an illegitimate country unworthy of normalization.

II. Research Methods

Syllabi Collection

On-line course offerings at U.S. colleges and universities from Fall 2008 to Spring 2019 were searched for courses whose titles or descriptions contained one or more of these keywords: “Israel,” “Israeli,” “Palestine,” “Palestinian,” “Zionism,” and “Zionist.” The descriptions of courses with one or more keywords were further reviewed to identify those courses focusing primarily on the contemporary Palestinian-Israeli or Arab-Israeli conflict. (Courses that included a section on the Palestinian-Israeli or Arab-Israeli conflict but the topic was not the primary focus of the course -- for example a course on the Modern Middle East -- were not included in the study).

In order to isolate the impact on course readings of support for academic BDS and its explicit call for the anti-normalization of Israel in the academy, syllabi were only included in the study if the course instructors were determined to support an academic boycott of Israel, or determined to not support either an academic boycott of Israel or BDS more generally, as explained below. The syllabi of course instructors who had publicly supported BDS initiatives or the BDS movement generally, but not an academic boycott in particular, were not included in this study.

The syllabi of courses that met the selection criteria were sought on-line and downloaded whenever possible, while a few course syllabi were submitted from students enrolled in the targeted courses. Only those syllabi containing detailed weekly reading assignments were included in the study. In those cases where more than one syllabus from a given course instructor was collected, only the most recent syllabus was used.

Syllabi from 50 courses at 40 colleges and universities (18 public, 22 private) were included in the study. These courses were offered in the following primary departments: History (18); Political Science (12); Middle East or Near East Studies (8); International Studies (4); Government (2); Literature (1); Religious Studies (1); Communications (1); Law (1); Ethnic Studies (1); Freshman Studies (1) and English (1). See Appendix for a list of colleges and universities whose course syllabi were included in the study.

Forty-eight of the syllabi were from courses taught by tenure-track faculty or visiting professors, while two of the syllabi were from courses taught by undergraduates under the supervision of tenure-track faculty members.

Determining Support for Academic Boycott of Israel and BDS

Individuals were determined to support the academic boycott of Israel if they had signed a publicly accessible petition, letter or statement endorsing or promoting an academic boycott of Israel, or made other public statements in support of it in traditional or social media.

Individuals were determined to be BDS-supporting if they had signed one or more publicly accessible petitions, letters or statements in support of boycotting, divesting from or sanctioning Israel or in support of the BDS movement itself in traditional or social media. For the purposes of this study, course instructors or authors who had expressed support for limited boycotts of Israel, such as a boycott of Israeli settlement products or businesses or of specific Israeli leaders, were also considered BDS-supporting.

In addition, it was assumed that Israelis would be disinclined to publicly support an academic, economic or cultural boycott of their own country that would negatively affect them. Therefore, Israeli authors who had made public statements or signed petitions challenging Israel's right to exist as a sovereign Jewish state or calling on Israelis to resist obligatory military service were also considered BDS-supporting for the purposes of this study.

It is important to note that lack of evidence of public support for an academic boycott of Israel or BDS more generally does not mean that an instructor or author does not support the academic boycott or BDS, only that no evidence of such support could be found on-line.

Syllabi Analysis

Compiling course readings

A list was compiled of the title and author(s) of each course's required weekly reading assignments. Since public expressions of support for boycotting, divesting from or sanctioning Israel were not prominent until 2002 at the earliest, only those readings with one or more specific authors who were alive as of 2003 were included in the study. The number of readings per syllabus included in this study ranged from a low of 8 required readings to a high of 82 required readings, with a mean of 40 required readings per course.

Classifying reading authors

Reading authors were each identified as being either: a) a supporter of BDS generally or an academic boycott of Israel specifically; or b) not a supporter of BDS. If a reading had multiple authors, it was considered BDS-authored if one or more of its authors was a BDS supporter.

Calculating percentage of BDS-authored readings

The percentage of BDS-authored readings for each course was calculated by dividing the number of BDS-authored readings on the syllabus by the total number of weekly readings included in the syllabus, and multiplying by 100.

III. Results

There was a very large, highly significant difference between the average percentages of BDS-authored readings in the syllabi of instructors who support the academic boycott of Israel (median **78%**), and those who do not support any form of BDS (median **17%**). (Mann-Whitney U-test: $T = 11.9$, $p = .000$).

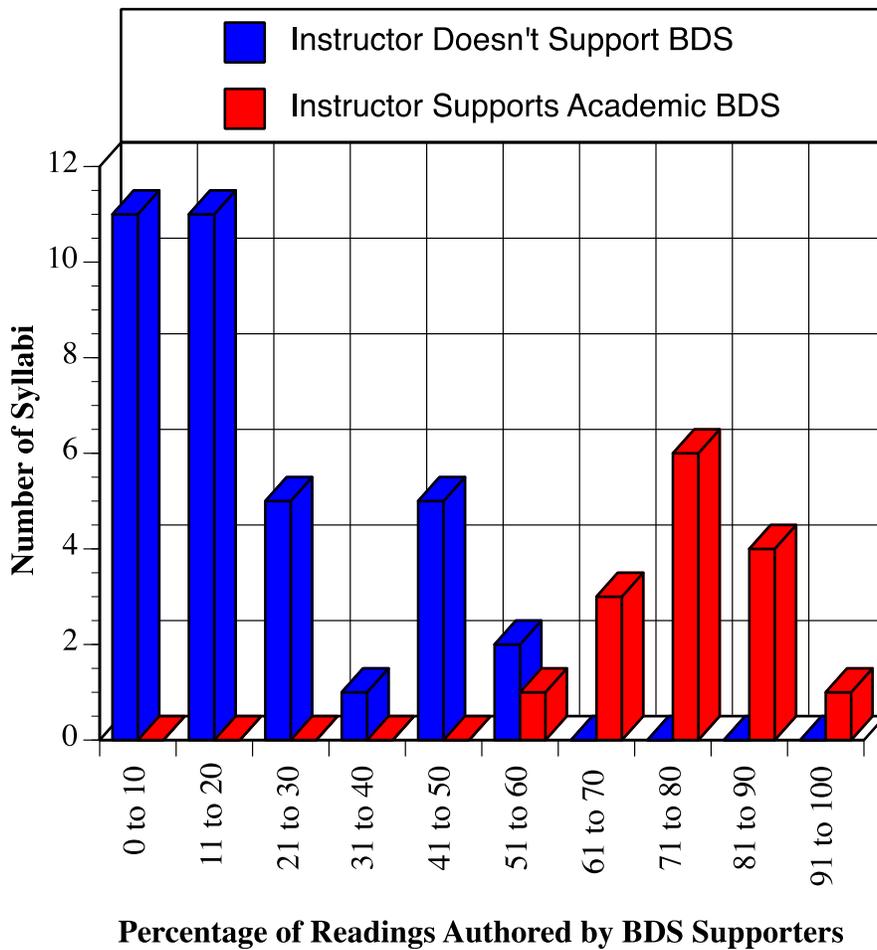
In addition, the two groups of instructors showed almost no overlap in the distribution of percentages of course readings with BDS-supporting authors: 13 of the 15 syllabi of academic boycott-supporting instructors had at least two-thirds of their readings authored by BDS-supporters, whereas only 2 of the 35 syllabi of non-BDS-supporting instructors had more than half of their readings authored by BDS-supporters and none of them with more than 60% of readings authored by BDS-supporters.

The statistical characteristics of the percentages of BDS-authored readings in the syllabi of both groups of instructors can be found in Table 1, and a histogram of the percentages of course readings with BDS-supporting authors for both groups can be found in Figure 1.

Table 1
Median, Minimum and Maximum of the Percentages of BDS-authored Readings for Academic Boycott Supporters and NO BDS Supporters

	Academic Boycott Supporters (N = 15)	NO BDS Supporters (N = 35)
Median %	78%	17%
Minimum %	54%	0%
Maximum %	100%	58%

Figure 1
Percentage of Course Readings with BDS-Supporting Authors for Academic BDS-Supporting Instructors and Instructors Who Do Not Support BDS



IV. Discussion and Recommendation

The stark difference between the average percentage of course readings with pro-BDS authors in the syllabi of academic BDS-supporting instructors (78%) and in the syllabi of instructors who had not expressed public support for any kind of BDS (17%), with almost no overlap between these two groups, leaves little doubt that instructors who support academic BDS make a calculated choice to heavily weight their course materials with readings authored by BDS supporters. This, in turn, strongly suggests that academic BDS-supporting instructors are using their Israel-related courses to promote a politically motivated, anti-Israel perspective that is compliant with the PACBI/USACBI guidelines calling on faculty to work against “the normalization of Israel in the global academy.” Moreover, the overwhelming percentage of readings with pro-BDS authors in the syllabi of the academic boycotters suggests that these faculty members prevent the normalization of Israel not only by including many readings that present Israel in a negative light, but also by severely limiting or completely excluding readings that would provide a more balanced picture of Israel.⁴

While freedom of speech protects faculty’s right to sign petitions and make extramural statements in support of academic BDS and academic freedom generally protects their right to develop and teach courses as they see fit, it is important to point out the harmful consequences of politically-motivated faculty weaponizing their course curricula to ensure that Israel is not “normalized” in the academy. Most obviously, limiting students’ exposure to a highly politicized one-sided narrative, whose goal is to portray Israel in the most negative light possible, deprives students of an accurate understanding of a complex topic of global importance.

More generally, the academic boycott’s goal of distorting and blocking the flow of knowledge and access to information about a topic of considerable scholarly concern and public interest violates the norms and standards of scholarly inquiry and undermines the university’s academic mission. And faculty who carry out the guidelines of academic BDS by substituting their personal politics for sound pedagogy cannot help but erode public trust in our universities’ ability to adequately educate the next generation of citizens.

Finally, faculty who use their classrooms to give academic legitimacy to a wholly one-sided, anti-Israel perspective, in compliance with the guidelines of academic BDS, can engender among their students hostility not only towards Israel, but towards Israel’s on-campus supporters, sentiments that can easily lead to acts targeting Jewish and pro-Israel students for harm. Indeed, AMCHA’s 2017 faculty report revealed that schools where

⁴ Although this study looked solely at whether course readings were authored by BDS supporters and did not at all consider the content of those readings, a recent detailed analysis of the content of assigned readings in a few “representative anti-Zionist courses” taught by academic BDS-supporting instructors whose syllabi were included in the current study provides strong evidence that an author’s support for BDS is likely to translate into readings that are strongly biased against Israel. See: Cary Nelson, *Israel Denial* (Washington, D.C. and Bloomington: Academic Engagement Network and Indiana University Press, 2019), pgs. 269 – 276.

academic departments held events with BDS-supporting speakers were twice as likely to have occurrences of student-produced anti-Zionist expression, and that such expression was itself very strongly linked to acts of Israel-related peer-on-peer harassment.

In light of these potential harms, we recommend that colleges and universities take the following steps to address the serious problem of faculty who bring their extramural support for an academic boycott of Israel onto campus and into their classrooms:

- **Acknowledge the Harms of Academic BDS for Students and Faculty** - School leaders should publicly acknowledge that while an academic boycott of Israel may ostensibly target Israeli universities and scholars, its implementation directly and substantively hurts students and faculty on their own campus, not only subverting their scholarly and educational opportunities and curtailing their academic freedom, but corrupting the entire academic mission of the university. Recently, chancellors and presidents at the University of California,⁵ University of Michigan,⁶ University of Massachusetts Amherst⁷ and Pitzer College⁸ have issued excellent statements acknowledging the harms of academic BDS for students and faculty, and condemning its implementation on their own campuses.
- **Establish Policies against Using the Classroom for Political Advocacy** - Universities should establish and publicly affirm policies that prohibit faculty from using their classrooms for political rather than pedagogical purposes. For example, in response to large-scale protests against the Vietnam War that were spilling into classrooms at the University of California, the UC Regents established the Policy on Course Content, which stated, “Misuse of the classroom by, for example, allowing it to be used for political indoctrination... constitutes misuse of the University as an institution.”⁹ Much more recently, following a vote by UC graduate teaching assistants to back the academic boycott of Israel,¹⁰ the UC Provost publicly reaffirmed that the school’s Policy on Course Content applies to both graduate student instructors¹¹ and faculty¹² who would use their classrooms to promote BDS.
- **Urge Faculty to Establish and Enforce Safeguards against Classroom Abuse** - Faculty should be urged by university administrators to establish their own safeguards against the politicization of the academy. For example at the University of Michigan, following the refusal of a faculty member to write a letter of recommendation for a

⁵ <https://amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/UC-Chancellors-statement-on-Israeli-academic-boycott-Dec-2018.pdf>

⁶ <https://president.umich.edu/news-communications/letters-to-the-community/letter-important-questions-around-issues-of-personal-beliefs-our-responsibilities-as-educators-and-anti-semitism/>

⁷ <https://www.umass.edu/newsoffice/article/statement-university-massachusetts-amherst>

⁸ <https://www.pitzer.edu/president/message-to-the-pitzer-college-community-from-president-melvin-oliver/>

⁹ <https://regents.universityofcalifornia.edu/governance/policies/2301.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2014/12/11/u-california-ta-union-votes-boycott-israel>

¹¹ <https://amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/9-8-14-Letter-from-Provost-Dorr-re-BDS-Movement.pdf>

¹² <https://www.amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/12-19-14-Benjamin-Response.pdf>

student wanting to study in Israel, the school's president assembled a faculty panel to investigate the question, "What ought to be the intersection between political thought/ideology and a faculty member's responsibility to students?" Earlier this year the panel issued a report and recommendations that included the core statement of principle, "as faculty members make judgments and act in their role as teachers, they must do so based solely on educational and professional reasons."

Ultimately, it is up to academic departments and faculty senates to determine whether the promotion of one-sided, highly politicized course content is deemed a legitimate use of academic freedom, or an abuse of it. However, given the clear and present harm that such politicization can cause to our schools, our students and society, it is time for tuition and taxpayers, as well as state and federal legislators, to demand that faculty address this question forthrightly, and to hold them accountable for their answer.

Appendix

Public and Private Colleges and Universities whose Syllabi were Included In the Study for Course Instructors Supporting Academic BDS and Instructors not Expressing Support for BDS

1. Syllabi of Courses Taught by Academic BDS-supporting Instructors:

University/College	Public/Private	Department	Semester
Columbia University	Private	ME Studies	Spring 2018
Georgetown University	Private	Arab Studies	Fall 2017
New York University	Private	ME Studies	Spring 2017
North Carolina State U.	Public	History	Spring 2018
Pitzer College	Private	Freshman Studies	Spring 2019
Princeton University	Private	History	Fall 2018
Rice University	Private	History	Fall 2016
Stanford University	Private	History	Spring 2019
UC Berkeley	Public	Ethnic Studies	Fall 2019
UC Irvine	Public	Literature	Winter 2017
UC Riverside	Public	English	Spring 2015
UC San Diego	Public	Communications	Spring 2016
UC Santa Barbara	Public	History	Winter 2017
University of Georgia	Public	History	Spring 2012
Vassar College	Private	History	Fall 2008

2. Syllabi of Courses Taught by Non-BDS-supporting Instructors:

University/College	Public/Private	Department	Semester
American University	Private	International Studies	Spring 2017
Boston University	Private	History	Fall 2016
Boston University	Private	History	Spring 2016
Boston University	Private	History	Spring 2019
Brandeis University	Private	Political Science	Fall 2016
Brandeis University	Private	NE & Jewish Studies	Spring 2015
Brandeis University	Private	NE & Jewish Studies	Summer 2017
Brown University	Private	History	Spring 2017
CUNY Queens	Public	History	Spring 2012
DePaul University	Private	Intl. Studies	Summer 2015
Emory University	Private	History	Fall 2016
Florida International U.	Public	Political Science	Spring 2017
George Mason U.	Public	Government	Spring 2016
George Washington U.	Private	International Studies	Spring 2017

George Washington U.	Private	Political Science	Spring 2018
Georgetown University	Private	Government	Spring 2011
Harvard University	Private	NE Langs. and Cultures	Spring 2015
Lehigh University	Private	Intl & Jewish Studies	Spring 2015
Northeastern University	Private	Political Science	Fall 2017
Princeton University	Private	NE Studies	Spring 2017
Rutgers University	Public	ME Studies & Pol. Sci.	Spring 2011
St. Lawrence University	Private	History	Spring 2014
SUNY at Albany	Public	Political Science	Fall 2013
Syracuse University	Private	Political Science	Fall 2014
Tulane University	Private	Political Science	Spring 2017
UC Irvine	Public	Political Science	Winter 2017
University of Alabama	Public	Political Science	Fall 2012
U. of Colorado Boulder	Public	History	Fall 2014
U. of Colorado Boulder	Public	Hist. & Jewish Studies	Spring 2013
U. of Connecticut	Public	Political Science	Winter 2017
University of Georgia	Public	History	Spring 2016
University of Michigan	Public	History	Winter 2016
University of Oregon	Public	Law	Winter 2017
University of Rochester	Private	Rel. & Jewish Studies	Spring 2017
University of Wisconsin	Public	Political Science	Spring 2017

Lead Researchers

Leila Beckwith is Professor Emeritus at UCLA and the co-founder of AMCHA Initiative. After receiving her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, Beckwith went on to teach and do statistical research for more than 30 years at the Neuropsychiatric Institute and the Department of Pediatrics at UCLA. She has published more than 80 research publications in scientific, peer-reviewed journals. She is a board member of the California Association of Scholars and Scholars for Peace in the Middle East. A renowned scientist and researcher, she has been an editorial board member of *Child Development*, *Infant Behavior and Development*, and the *Infant Mental Health Journal*, as well as an ad hoc reviewer for research papers submitted to *Developmental Psychology*, and grants submitted to the National Science Foundation and the National Foundation for the March of Dimes. Beckwith served as an appointed member of research review committees for the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Institute of Drug Abuse and the National Institute of Child Health and Development. She was also a prevention research advisory committee member for the National Institute of Mental Health and a principal investigator for research grants from the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Institute of Child Health and Development, and the Center for Disease Control.

Tammi Rossman-Benjamin is cofounder and director of AMCHA Initiative, and was a faculty member in Hebrew and Jewish Studies at the University of California from 1996 - 2016. Rossman-Benjamin has written articles and reports about academic anti-Zionism and antisemitism and lectured widely on the growing threat to the safety of Jewish students on college campuses. She has presented her research in scholarly talks and academic conferences at several universities, including Indiana University, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Harvard University and McGill University. Rossman-Benjamin's research has been featured in several volumes on antisemitism. In July 2010, she co-organized a two-week scholarly workshop entitled "Contemporary Antisemitism in Higher Education" at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Articles and opinion pieces from Rossman-Benjamin have been published in *Newsweek*, *The Hill*, *New York Daily News*, *Los Angeles Daily News*, *San Jose Mercury News*, *Sacramento Bee*, *Contra Costa Times*, *Jewish Journal of Los Angeles*, and dozens of others.