

April 5, 2010

Margaret Atwood  
c/o McClelland & Stewart  
75 Sherbourne St., 5th Floor  
Toronto, ON  
M5A 2P9  
Canada

Dear Ms Atwood,

I have recently learnt that you are to travel to Israel in May, to be awarded the prestigious Dan David prize. Was this a very different prize, then I would be both pleased and proud for you and for us. Like so many others (probably many millions) I was moved and influenced greatly by your writing. Your writing appeared at the historical juncture it was most needed, and was welcomed by us all for its courage, the challenges it offered, and the committed feminism which has never become ossified, never turned into a dogma but remained live and true.

The wide recognition your work has received worldwide has affected the life of many, not just women, but of feminist men such as myself. As you have become more than a mere teller of stories, and always were the master (sic) of social narratives, what you do and say carries an enormous weight, something you must be aware of more than anybody.

I am writing to beg you, as an Israeli Jew who is totally committed to Palestine and the human and political rights of the Palestinians, to give all of us your courageous support we have grown to expect and respect, and to take the unlikely stance of refusing this prize. I fully realize how difficult such a request must be for you; the recognition and international fame, not to mention the funds, surely means a lot to a writer who lives by her pen alone, and I do not for a moment wish to overlook this. So what right have I, or for that matter, anyone else, to ask you to deny yourself this mark of appreciation and honour, which I myself am sure you more than richly deserve?

I am asking personally for this great sacrifice on your part, as one of many Jews, and increasingly also Israelis, who recognize a historical duty to stand up and be counted, to stand with the Palestinians against their brutal oppressors, after many decades of an iniquitous and inhuman military occupation, with no end in sight. I am asking you also as a fellow artist, as an independent filmmaker, and as someone whose family was wiped out in Poland by the Nazis. As such, I am bound to disagree with what Israel, and Israeli society, has done in my name for so many years, to no avail but with much suffering caused. Israel is not a tyranny – it is a democracy, for Jews only, of course, and it calls itself a Jewish democracy, which I am sure you will agree is a difficult concept; I would argue it is an oxymoron. I am making this point because by receiving this prize, you will by definition tying your name to this militarized, brutalized and brutalizing society, denting any rights to the Palestinians, exiling them from their land, and killing numerous civilians through a combination of racism, nationalism and Orientalism for the crime of their identity.

This society depends on all of us for its continued violence - it depends on our silence, on our being co-opted, on our international acceptance of the 'deeds done'; we should never agree to support it, I believe, until it radically changes all its practices and beliefs, and agrees to treat

Palestinians as human beings with full rights. The change needed is deeper than that required by the South African society. Would you have travelled to South Africa during apartheid? I cannot believe so, and yet you may travel to a state which uses all the modern technology of warfare against helpless, impoverished and terrorized civilians, like the almost two millions trapped in Gaza?

By going there now, you would add your immense moral authority to a state of military thugs, a state founded on inequality and plunder, a state which continuously unsettles and terrorizes the Middle East, yet presents itself as a victim! Your support is crucial for Israel – it needs liberals from all over the world to cleanse its image, to help it argue its case, to present it as a normal society – all of which is behind its relentless efforts and expense in luring internationally-renown authors, artists and intellectuals to its halls of culture, to receive prizes for their work which supports humane values...

I would put it to you that you would not have travelled to Chile under Pinochet to receive a literary prize; why would you do so now in Israel?

By refusing this prize, you would be giving moral support for the struggle for just peace in the Middle East, and for the human and political rights of the Palestinians. I put it to you that the courage required for such a deed is the courage your own work have displayed and exemplified over the decades for us all! The refusal of this prize would indeed cement your humane record in a unique way, giving hope to a people whose hope was brutally murdered.

Dear Margaret – please do not forsake us!

Sincerely yours,

Prof. Haim Bresheeth  
University of East London  
UK