

Scandal Hits Israel's Top Prize, With Claims of Witch Hunt Against the Left

The education minister's decision opposing giving the prestigious Israel Prize to Prof. Oded Goldreich over his alleged support for BDS is only the latest in a string of controversies that marred the festive award ceremony

[Allison Kaplan Sommer](#)

[Judy Maltz](#)

Apr. 14, 2021 4:04 PM

The Israel Prize, the country's highest cultural and academic honor, which is awarded in a festive ceremony broadcast on Independence Day, is meant to celebrate the country's greatest achievements and most respected minds. But this year – and not for the first time – the festivities have been overshadowed by controversy, highlighting a less attractive side of the country: its deep and persistent political divisions.

At this year's ceremony, which was prerecorded on Sunday, no mention was made of [Prof. Oded Goldreich](#), who had been selected by the Israel Prize selection committee to receive the 2021 award in mathematics and computer science. The reason: Education Minister Yoav Gallant's contention that Goldreich is a supporter of the [boycott, sanctions and divestment](#) movement against Israel, which led the Likud party cabinet member to refuse to approve the prize going to Goldreich.

Calling the prize “the most prestigious honor Israel can bestow,” Gallant said that “anyone who does not hold the State of Israel and its laws close to their heart does not deserve the Israel Prize.” While Goldreich may be “a brilliant scientist,” Gallant claimed that, by supporting the BDS movement, he “spits in the face of the State of Israel and Israeli academia, and may even be breaking the law.”

But Goldreich has declared publicly that he does not support BDS, although he is an outspoken opponent of the occupation and the West Bank settlement movement.

“If I supported BDS, I would not have agreed to accept the prize. I would have had to boycott it,” Goldreich said in response to Gallant's allegations. Branding the Education Minister's approach “political persecution” aimed at delegitimizing the left, he claimed that the education minister had looked for grounds to justify denying him the prize due to Goldreich's leftist views.

When the Weizmann Institute professor was first selected by the prize jury, Gallant attributed his objections to the professor's signing onto [a 2019 letter](#) calling on the German parliament to

refrain from passing legislation denouncing BDS as antisemitic. “We should protest against any antisemitic utterances and deeds – whether they come from BDS supporters or not,” the letter read. “But BDS as such is not antisemitic. We therefore defend the right of any individual or organization to support it.”

Many people interpreted the letter as a defense of freedom of expression rather than explicit support for BDS and called it a weak argument for denying Goldreich the prize. But subsequently, a right-wing advocacy group, Im Tirtzu, provided Gallant with additional ammunition.

The group pointed to the fact that last month, along with hundreds of academics from around the world, Goldreich had called on the European Union not to fund projects affiliated with Ariel University, an Israeli university in the West Bank settlement of Ariel, as proof of his support for the boycott of Israel.

The appeal to the European Union was to “ensure that its taxpayer-funded research program is not used to legitimize or otherwise sustain the establishment and the activities of Israeli academic institutions in illegal settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory.”

Gallant declared that he would not support “a boycott supporter standing on a stage on Independence Day and receiving a prize from the heads of state.”

Gallant said he would “complete [an] investigation into whether the professor’s renunciation of the boycott movement was sincere and whether the information he gave to the court and the state is correct.” Depending on the results of Gallant’s investigation and the court’s response, Goldreich will either be denied the prize outright or will receive it at a later date.

This is hardly the first time that the prestigious Israel Prize has sparked controversy – generally but not always for political reasons. In 2015, while serving as acting education minister, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu disqualified three members of the prize jury over their left-wing views – Ariel Hirschfeld and Avner Holtzman, who had been appointed to the literary prize panel and Chayim Sharir, who had been appointed to the film prize jury. Eight other jurors, including internationally acclaimed author David Grossman, then resigned in protest. But following the intervention of Attorney General Yehuda Weinstein, the prime minister relented.

In 2017, the announcement that [David Be’eri](#), a controversial right-wing activist, would be the recipient of the Israel Prize Lifetime Achievement award sparked outrage on the left. Be’eri founded Elad, an organization committed to purchasing property for Jewish residents in the Muslim neighborhoods of East Jerusalem. In a petition published at the time, the left-wing group Ir Amim described the choice of Be’eri as “a grave affront to anyone who values an equitable and peaceful Jerusalem.”

In 1993, the late Rabbi Yeshayahu Leibowitz – a scientist, philosopher and Orthodox Jew who was also a vocal critic of the occupation and of the religious establishment – was chosen for the same lifetime achievement award. Angry that Leibowitz had encouraged Israeli soldiers to refuse

orders, the prime minister at the time, Yitzhak Rabin, threatened to boycott the ceremony. To avoid embarrassing the Israeli premier, Leibowitz decided to forgo the award.

He would not be the first. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion was awarded the Life Achievement prize in 1968, on the occasion of Israel's 20th anniversary. But he refused to accept it, noting that in all his work on behalf of the country, he was "merely fulfilling my civic duty," as he put it.

Yuval Ne'eman, a former far-right cabinet minister who received the prize in physics in 1969, returned it in protest in 1992. He surprised the audience when he made the announcement in the middle of the awards ceremony, as the prize in Arabic literature was being presented to the writer and former Knesset member Emil Habibi. Ne'eman was angry that Israel's most prestigious honor would be bestowed upon an individual who had also accepted a prize from PLO leader Yasir Arafat.

Painter-sculptor Moshe Gershuni had been due to receive the award in 2003, but it was revoked after he announced that he would not attend the ceremony. "My conscience prevents me from going onto the podium. This is not the time for ceremonies and celebrations," he explained. But the real reason, it was widely presumed, was that he did not want to shake hands with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

The controversy surrounding Goldreich was not even the first this year to overshadow the Israel Prize. An even bigger scandal was averted in the nick of time.

Yehuda Meshi-Zahav, the co-founder and chairman of the Zaka volunteer emergency medical response organization, had been named winner of the Lifetime Achievement award. He announced that he would forgo the prize after he was accused in [a Haaretz investigation](#) of highly serious acts of sexual abuse against men, women and children over the course several decades. The police have since launched an investigation into the allegations.

Goldreich's predicament did not go unnoticed by this year's other Israel Prize recipients. After receiving her prize for achievement in cinema, director Michal Bat-Adam said that while she was pleased to receive the award, she was "very sad" because "we're missing one winner." Bat-Adam joined four of the other prize winners in a written protest of Gallant's effort to deny the prize to Goldreich.

Others protested the move as well, including presidents of Israeli universities, who released a joint letter on Friday attacking Gallant's withholding the prize from Goldreich.

"Denying a person a prize due to their political beliefs contradicts the basic principle of the Israel Prize and severely harms free speech and free thought," the letter, addressed to Gallant stated. "Your decision creates the difficult impression that only those who 'toe the line' will be rewarded, and anyone who dares express a political opinion outside of the consensus will be punished."