

# Opinion: Israel 'cancels' a prize to a mathematician — and dishonors itself

By [Gershom Gorenberg](#)

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Oded Goldreich is Israel's preeminent mathematician. Don't take my word for it. This past February, a committee of experts named the Weizmann Institute of Science professor to receive the Israel Prize — the country's most prestigious honor — in mathematics. Those who understand such matters as pseudo-randomness and zero-knowledge proof systems say Goldreich's theoretical work is fundamental to today's computing.

The experts — whose names are kept secret to avoid outside pressures — were appointed by Israel's then-education minister, [Yoav Gallant](#), of the ruling party at the time, Likud. Yet Gallant took the unprecedented step of blocking — or should we say, canceling — Goldreich's award. Gallant claimed the mathematician supported the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement (BDS) against Israel, and thus should not receive an accolade from the state.

Gallant's handpicked committee even went to the Israeli Supreme Court to petition against the decision. The justices eventually bounced approval of the prize choice to the new education minister, Yifat Shasha-Biton, from a smaller right-wing party. She, too, cast a veto — and the government's expert panel has once more asked the court to intervene.

Gallant and Shasha-Biton contend that Goldreich's public statements are so extreme that the state cannot honor him. The panel of experts say Goldreich's views are irrelevant — that, according to the prize rules, it was strictly awarded for his scientific achievement.

Before we look at the absurdity of the claims against Goldreich, let's consider the larger issue: Are there times when someone's publicly stated views should disqualify them from an award, even in an unrelated field?

*Yes, but.* For one thing, it depends on who is giving a prize. A foundation or nongovernmental organization has the right to set its own limits and to decide that honoring a person legitimizes a viewpoint it considers odious. Even then, I'd suggest great care. In theory, the International Mathematical Union could reverse a decision to grant the Fields Medal — the mathematics equivalent of a Nobel Prize — after finding out that the winner was, say, a conspiracy-spouting anti-vaxxer. But each decision in this vein would make the prize less a recognition of mathematical genius and more an accolade for public acceptability.

A government is a different matter, if it claims to be democratic. Its own legitimacy rests on guaranteeing freedom of expression, including of ideas that most citizens consider loathsome. If your chance of receiving a state honor for your poetry or your breakthrough in quantum physics depends on saying only what's acceptable this year, freedom has shrunk in your country.

That, broadly, has been the attitude of Israel's Supreme Court toward the Israel Prize. The prize is given annually in several wide areas, with the specific fields rotating from year to year. The choices are often controversial. In 2004, for instance, the prize for sculpture went to Igael Tumarkin. Besides his avant-garde art, Tumarkin was known for rather awful comments about Jews from Morocco, ultra-Orthodox Jews and other groups.

Yet the Supreme Court rejected three suits to order the education minister to veto the award. The public had every right to criticize the choice, the court ruled, but the minister could only interfere if there was a procedural flaw, such as a conflict of interest.

Last year, the court dismissed a similar suit to deny the prize in Jewish religious literature to Rabbi Yaakov Ariel, despite his history of making homophobic statements. His comments, the court said, indeed “insulted an entire community” but were “protected by freedom of expression.”

The Goldreich controversy began with Gallant ignoring those rulings and seeking to overturn the committee's choice. His evidence, it would emerge, included Goldreich's signature on a letter by Jewish and Israeli scholars to the German parliament, opposing resolutions to label the BDS movement as antisemitic. Yet the letter explicitly states that some signatories reject BDS, while viewing the antisemitism allegation as “deceitful.” Goldreich himself has said this year that he opposes boycotts of Israel. Rather, he is an outspoken opponent of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and of Israeli settlements.

The final, supposedly damning, evidence against Goldreich was that this year he signed another letter from scholars, addressed to the European Union, urging it not to fund research programs at the Israeli university in the West Bank settlement of Ariel. The current education minister, Shasha-Biton, argues that Goldreich himself is attacking academic freedom and therefore can't claim the protection of freedom of expression.

This logic does not hold up. As Goldreich's lawyer, Michael Sfar, pointed out to me, the letter urges the E.U. to strictly follow the terms of its bilateral research agreement with Israel. The accord says it applies only within Israel's pre-1967 borders — excluding settlements. With gritted teeth, an Israeli government signed that pact and accepted the exclusion of Ariel University.

The letter to the E.U. that Goldreich signed wasn't about academic freedom; it was about the settlement project, and whether it's legitimate and moral. “That's *the* question that has divided Israeli society” since 1967 “and is the basis of political debate,” said Sfar.

He's right, of course. Gallant and Shasha-Biton support settlement. Goldreich is an outspoken, principled opponent. In denying him an honor for that reason, they only dishonor the government. This isn't higher math.

Opinion by Gershon Gorenberg

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