Dear Student Leaders at the University of California – Berkeley

It was with great joy that I learned of your recent 16-4 vote in support of divesting your university’s money from companies that enable and profit from the injustice of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and violation of Palestinian human rights. Principled stands like this, supported by a fast growing number of US civil society organizations and people of conscience, including prominent Jewish groups, are essential for a better world in the making, and it is always an inspiration when young people lead the way and speak truth to power.

I am writing to tell you that, despite what detractors may allege, you are doing the right thing. You are doing the moral thing. You are doing that which is incumbent on you as humans who believe that all people have dignity and rights, and that all those being denied their dignity and rights deserve the solidarity of their fellow human beings.

I have been to the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and I have witnessed the racially segregated roads and housing that reminded me so much of the conditions we experienced in South Africa under the racist system of Apartheid. I have witnessed the humiliating of Palestinian men, women, and children made to wait hours at Israeli military checkpoints routinely when trying to make the most basic of trips to visit relatives or attend school or college, and this humiliation is familiar to me and the many black South Africans who were corralled and regularly insulted by the security forces of the Apartheid government.

In South Africa, we could not have achieved our freedom and just peace without the help of people around the world, who through the use of non-violent means, such as boycotts and divestment, encouraged their governments and other corporate actors to reverse decades-long support for the Apartheid regime.

Students played a leading role in that struggle, and I write this letter with a special indebtedness to your school, Berkeley, for its pioneering role in advocating equality in South Africa and promoting corporate ethical and social responsibility to end complicity in Apartheid. I visited your campus in the 1980’s and was touched to...
find students sitting out in the baking sunshine to demonstrate for the University’s divestment in companies supporting the South African regime.

The same issue of equality is what motivates the divestment movement of today, which tries to end Israel’s 43 year-long occupation and the unequal treatment of the Palestinian people by the Israeli government ruling over them. The abuses they face are real, and no person should be offended by principled, morally consistent, non-violent acts to oppose them. It is no more wrong to call out Israel in particular for its abuses than it was to call out the Apartheid regime in particular for its abuses.

To those who wrongly accuse you of unfairness or harm done to them by this call for divestment, I suggest, with humility, that the harm suffered from being confronted with opinions that challenge one’s own pales in comparison to the harm done by living a life under occupation and daily denial of basic rights and dignity. It is not with rancor that we criticize the Israeli government, but with hope, a hope that a better future can be made for both Israelis and Palestinians, a future in which both the violence of the occupier and the resulting violent resistance of the occupied come to an end, and where one people need not rule over another, engendering suffering, humiliation, and retaliation. True peace must be anchored in justice and an unwavering commitment to universal rights for all humans, regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender, national origin or any other identity attribute. You, students, are helping to pave that path to a just peace.

I heartily endorse your divestment vote and encourage you to stand firm on the side of what is right,

God bless you richly,

Desmond Tutu. Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town.