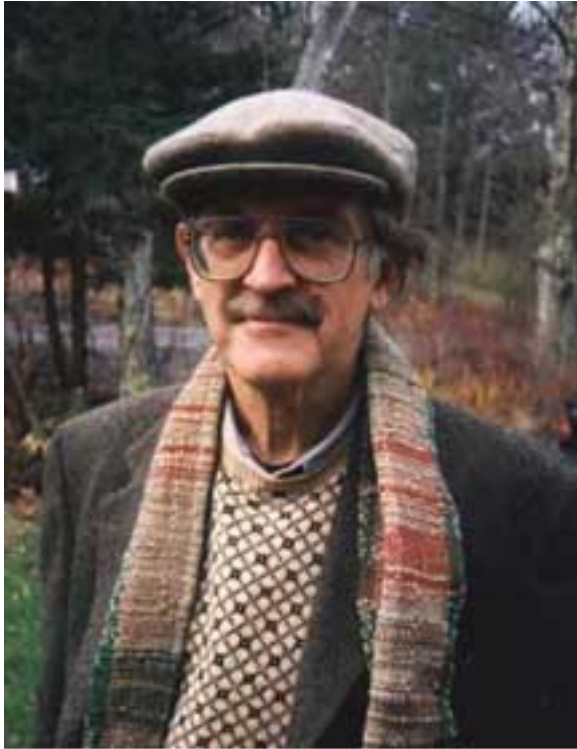


Joel Kovel fired from Bard College for anti-Zionism

STATEMENT OF JOEL KOVEL REGARDING HIS TERMINATION BY BARD COLLEGE

Introduction



Joel Kovel

In January, 1988, I was appointed to the Alger Hiss Chair of Social Studies at Bard College. As this was a Presidential appointment outside the tenure system, I have served under a series of contracts. The last of these was half-time (one semester on, one off, with half salary and full benefits year-round), effective from July 1, 2004, to June 30, 2009. On February 7 I received a letter from Michèle Dominy, Dean of the College, informing me that my contract would not be renewed this July 1 and that I would be moved to emeritus status as of that day. She wrote that this decision was made by President Botstein, Executive Vice-President Papadimitriou and herself, in consultation with members of the Faculty Senate.

This document argues that this termination of service is prejudicial and motivated neither by intellectual nor pedagogic considerations, but by political values, principally stemming from differences between myself and the Bard administration on the issue of Zionism. There is of course much more to my years at Bard than this, including another controversial subject, my work on ecosocialism (*The Enemy of Nature*). However, the evidence shows a pattern of conflict over Zionism only too reminiscent of innumerable instances in this country in which critics of Israel have been made to pay, often with their careers, for speaking out. In this

instance the process culminated in a deeply flawed evaluation process which was used to justify my termination from the faculty.

▣ A brief chronology

- 2002. This was the first year I spoke out nationally about Zionism. In October, my article, "Zionism's Bad Conscience," appeared in Tikkun. Three or four weeks later, I was called into President Leon Botstein's office, to be told my Hiss Chair was being taken away. Botstein said that he had nothing to do with the decision, then gratuitously added that it had not been made because of what I had just published about Zionism, and hastened to tell me that his views were diametrically opposed to mine.
- 2003. In January I published a second article in Tikkun, "'Left-Anti-Semitism' and the Special Status of Israel," which argued for a One-State solution to the dilemmas posed by Zionism. A few weeks later, I received a phone call at home from Dean Dominy, who suggested, on behalf of Executive Vice-President Dimitri Papadimitriou, that perhaps it was time for me to retire from Bard. I declined. The result of this was an evaluation of my work and the inception, in 2004, of the current half-time contract as "Distinguished Professor."
- 2006. I finished a draft of *Overcoming Zionism*. In January, while I was on a Fellowship in South Africa, President Botstein conducted a concert on campus of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, which he has directed since 2003. In a stunning departure from traditional concert practice, this began with the playing of the national anthems of the United States and Israel, after each of which the audience rose. Except for a handful of protestors, the event went unnoticed. I regarded it, however, as paradigmatic of the "special relationship" between the United States and Israel, one that has conduced to war in Iraq and massive human rights violations in Israel/Palestine. In December, I organized a public lecture at Bard (with Mazin Qumsiyeh) to call attention to this problem. Only one faculty person attended; the rest were students and community people; and the issue was never taken up on campus.
- 2007. *Overcoming Zionism* was now on the market, arguing for a One-State solution (and sharply criticizing, among others, Martin Peretz for a scurrilous op-ed piece against Rachel Corrie in the Los Angeles Times. Peretz is an official in AIPAC's foreign policy think-tank, and at the time a Bard Trustee—though this latter fact was not pointed out in the book). In August, *Overcoming Zionism* was attacked by a watchdog Zionist group, StandWithUs/Michigan, which succeeded in pressuring the book's United States distributor, the University of Michigan Press, to remove it from circulation. An extraordinary outpouring of support (650 letters to U of M) succeeded in reversing this frank episode of book-burning. I was disturbed, however, by the fact that, with the exception of two non-tenure track faculty, there was no support from Bard in response to this egregious violation of the speech rights of a professor. When I asked President Botstein in an email why this was so, he replied that he felt I was doing quite well at taking care of myself. This was irrelevant to the obligation of a college to protect its faculty from violation of their rights of free expression—all the more so, a college such as Bard with a carefully honed reputation as a bastion of academic freedom, and which indeed defines such freedom in its

Faculty Handbook as a "right . . . to search for truth and understanding without interference and to disseminate his [sic] findings without intimidation."

- 2008. Despite some reservations by the faculty, I was able to teach a course on Zionism. In my view, and that of most of the students, it was carried off successfully. Concurrently with this, another evaluation of my work at Bard was underway. Unlike previous evaluations, in 1996 and 2003, this was unenthusiastic. It was cited by Dean Dominy as instrumental in the decision to let me go.

Irregularities in the Evaluation Process

The evaluation committee included Professor Bruce Chilton, along with Professors Mark Lambert and Kyle Gann. Professor Chilton is a member of the Social Studies division, a distinguished theologian, and the campus' Protestant chaplain. He is also active in Zionist circles, as chair of the Episcopal–Jewish Relations Committee in the Episcopal Diocese of New York, and a member of the Executive Committee of Christians for Fair Witness on the Middle East. In this capacity he campaigns vigorously against Protestant efforts to promote divestment and sanctions against the State of Israel. Professor Chilton is particularly antagonistic to the Palestinian liberation theology movement, Sabeel, and its leader, Rev. Naim Ateek, also an Episcopal. This places him on the other side of the divide from myself, who attended a Sabeel Conference in Birmingham, MI, in October, 2008, as an invited speaker, where I met Rev. Ateek, and expressed admiration for his position. It should also be observed that Professor Chilton was active this past January in supporting Israeli aggression in Gaza. He may be heard on a national radio program on WABC, "Religion on the Line," (January 11, 2009) arguing from the Doctrine of Just War and claiming that it is anti-Semitic to criticize Israel for human rights violations—this despite the fact that large numbers of Jews have been in the forefront of protesting Israeli crimes in Gaza.

Of course, Professor Chilton has the right to his opinion as an academic and a citizen. Nonetheless, the presence of such a voice on the committee whose conclusion was instrumental in the decision to remove me from the Bard faculty is highly dubious. Most definitely, Professor Chilton should have recused himself from this position. His failure to do so, combined with the fact that the decision as a whole was made in context of adversity between myself and the Bard administration, renders the process of my termination invalid as an instance of what the College's Faculty Handbook calls a procedure "designed to evaluate each faculty member fairly and in good faith."

I still strove to make my future at Bard the subject of reasonable negotiation. However, my efforts in this direction were rudely denied by Dean Dominy's curt and dismissive letter (at the urging, according to her, of Vice-President Papadimitriou), which plainly asserted that there was nothing to talk over and that I was being handed a fait accompli. In view of this I considered myself left with no other option than the release of this document.

On the responsibility of intellectuals

Bard has effectively crafted for itself an image as a bastion of progressive thought. Its efforts

were crowned with being anointed in 2005 by the Princeton Review as the second-most progressive college in the United States, the journal adding that Bard "puts the 'liberal' in 'liberal arts.'" But "liberal" thought evidently has its limits; and my work against Zionism has encountered these.

A fundamental principle of mine is that the educator must criticize the injustices of the world, whether or not this involves him or her in conflict with the powers that be. The systematic failure of the academy to do so plays no small role in the perpetuation of injustice and state violence. In no sphere of political action does this principle apply more vigorously than with the question of Zionism; and in no country is this issue more strategically important than in the United States, given the fact that United States support is necessary for Israel's behavior. The worse this behavior, the more strenuous must be the suppression of criticism. I take the view, then, that Israeli human rights abuses are deeply engrained in a culture of impunity granted chiefly, though not exclusively, in the United States—which culture arises from suppression of debate and open inquiry within those institutions, such as colleges, whose social role it is to enlighten the public. Therefore, if the world stands outraged at Israeli aggression in Gaza, it should also be outraged at institutions in the United States that grant Israel impunity. In my view, Bard College is one such institution. It has suppressed critical engagement with Israel and Zionism, and therefore has enabled abuses such as have occurred and are occurring in Gaza. This notion is of course, not just descriptive of a place like Bard. It is also the context within which the critic of such a place and the Zionist ideology it enables becomes marginalized, and then removed.

For further information: www.codz.org ; Joel Kovel, "Overcoming Impunity," The Link Jan-March 2009 (www.ameu.org).

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