

## **“Anti-Semitism and Beyond Chutzpah”: A Talk with Dr. Norman Finkelstein**

*In June, 2008, a CJPME staff writer called American author Norman Finkelstein in New York and conducted the following interview. CJPME hosted Dr. Finkelstein for a three-city Canadian tour in May, 2008. Dr. Finkelstein’s theses – especially those expressed in *Beyond Chutzpah* – undermine the dominant North American narrative on Anti-Semitism. As a result, Dr. Finkelstein has paid a heavy personal price for the issues he seeks to bring to light.*

**Q: I want to begin by asking you about the book’s reception. The title may seem provocative for some people. Generally, has it been well-received?**

The book did not receive a single mainstream review in the United States. From the Nation at one end of the spectrum to the New Republic at the other end, complete silence. It was a very impressive show of Party unity, not seen, I think, since the days of the Great Leader Kim Il-in North Korea. Nonetheless it sold reasonably well because I was lecturing quite widely.

**Q: Part of your book deals with the use, or the misuse of anti-Semitism to “immunize” the State of Israel from critique and to also aide elite Jewish ethnic interests. How would you respond to concerns that your argument downplays the seriousness of anti-Semitism and it is better for watchdogs to be vigilant—if regrettably overzealous in some cases— given the ugly nature of this beast?**

Anti-Semitism is not a significant political fact in the Western world, for now, at any rate. Of course there is personal prejudice against Jews, but there’s also personal prejudice against fat people, short people and ugly people. In terms of denying access to jobs, education, housing, etc., anti-Semitism plays no role any longer, and there might be one violent assault here or there. The main political problem in the Western world, especially Europe, is the growing animus towards Muslims.

**Q: It can be argued that many communities in the United States and around the world, use the tools of past victimhood and discrimination to protect themselves or exploit a given situation. For example, the African-American community in the United States routinely invokes memories of slavery and segregation. Nations with a history of colonialism often invoke that experience to justify certain actions—rightly or wrongly—so what is particular about the current misuse of anti-Semitism that makes it so harmful in your view? Is it simply a question of influence or the direct impact it has on the Israel-Palestine Conflict?**

I do not think it is comparable when African-Americans invoke racism and slavery to when Jews invoke anti-Semitism. American Jews are by a wide margin the most prosperous ethnic group in the United States, far outstripping WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants). But there’s a real problem of African-American poverty, educational disadvantage, etc., and in my opinion a large part of this – not the whole, but a large part – is traceable to the legacy of slavery and the persistence of racism.

**Q: When discussing the misuse of anti-Semitism in the United States, you cite mainstream magazines and newspapers such as *The New York Times*. Why is mainstream media so complicit on this particular issue; is it a question of ideology?**

On this particular issue, I do think it is an ethnic thing. It is no secret that Jews occupy a crucial position in the media – publishing, Hollywood, newspapers. It would be surprising if they did not promote an ethnic agenda. After all, for the longest time, white males promoted an image of American history that privileged themselves. There have been about 200 Holocaust films coming out of Hollywood in the last 20 years. Could this solely be due to viewer demand?

**Q: A good part of your book is a searing indictment of Israel’s human rights record. This section is quite detailed: from house demolitions to medical treatment, you seem to have left nothing out. Why is it so important to focus on the human rights issue?**

First, few people are aware of the magnitude of Israel's human rights crimes in the Occupied Territories. I must say it was not easy for me to read through all the human rights reports. What Israel does on a daily basis is wretched beyond words. Second, human rights is not an abstract concept for most people: blowing up people's homes, routinely torturing detainees – ordinary people can relate to these issues.

**Q: What would you say to the critic who argues that the human rights route is biased against Israel?**

I would say that it's not human rights but the reality that is biased against Israel. The occupation has endured for 40 years. It has become steadily more brutal. On many facets of human rights, Israel's record is truly unique: it was the only country in the world to legalize house demolitions as a form of punishment (apart from a brief period in Iraq under Saddam Hussein), to legalize torture, to legalize hostage-taking.

**Q: On the same vein, you focus extensively on international law and you have a detailed appendix discussing Israel's High Court in comparison with the International Court of Justice. Why focus on international law when some consider it essentially useless because it is easily changeable, unenforceable, and inconsistent in its application (for example powerful countries seem exempt)?**

The World Court commands respect in the international community. The judges are quite serious, as are the opinions they write. In the case of the July 2004 advisory opinion of the Court, the vote was 14-1. Even the one dissenting judge, Thomas Buergenthal from the U.S., was very careful to qualify his dissent. This means that there's overwhelming agreement in the highest judicial body in the world on crucial questions bearing on the Israel-Palestine conflict, including a return to the June 1967 borders and the illegality of Israel's settlements.

**Q: The book also discusses the academic violations in Professor Alan Dershowitz's The Case for Israel, notably the issue of plagiarism which is convincingly documented in the first appendix of the book. On p. 229 you write, "Dershowitz can appropriate from a hoax [Joan Peters' From Time Immemorial] with impunity due to an environment that tolerates such derelictions..." That environment was Harvard University. How is it that a Harvard professor can get away with plagiarism? This will seem extraordinary to the average person.**

In his (alleged) autobiography titled *Chutzpah*, Alan Dershowitz wrote that most academics are cowards. On this point he's absolutely right. Everyone knows that Dershowitz is vindictive, so they stay out of his way. Also, they just don't care. When a Harvard professor commits plagiarism, it's just not the same thing as when ordinary mortals do it. How can you apply the same standards to the Gods and to ordinary mortals? Harvard professors were put here to judge others, not to be judged.

**Q: In the dedication of your book you write "To Musa Abu Hashhash and his fellow human rights workers, Palestinian and Israeli, preserving the truth from falsifiers". What can ordinary people do to preserve the truth given the depth of misinformation and disinformation? After all, it seems to be coming from renowned institutions and media establishments.**

You do your best. It's the most that anyone can do. How effective it is, I cannot say. I do my small part, and hope it has some effect. But even if it didn't, I'd still do it. The lies eat me up inside. Exposing them is a form of therapy.

**Q: Lastly, since the publication of *Beyond Chutzpah*, have you seen any changes in the misusing of anti-Semitism, does this tactic remain effective?**

I think it's becoming progressively more ineffective, because it's now being used against mainstream people, who have the resources to fight back, and who are well known enough that it can't be taken seriously. When Jimmy Carter came out with his book Palestine: Peace not Apartheid, he was called a Holocaust denier, anti-Semite, supporter of Nazis, and on and on. But the book still climbed to the top of the bestseller list and Carter received a positive reception around the country.