

Academic Freedom for Some

By Judy Haiven

September 2007 was bright and beautiful. Classes were just beginning for the university year. In the late summer sunshine, my institution looked idyllic—a kind and protected place for academics.

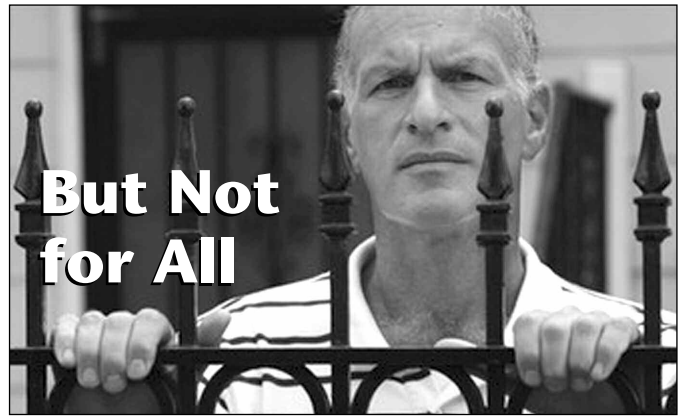
However, halfway across the U.S., things did not look so pleasant. Professor Norman Finkelstein is a political scientist with five critically acclaimed books already published, the author of dozens of scholarly articles, and one of the most popular professors at DePaul University in Chicago. He should have been a shoo-in for tenure.

However, Finkelstein's academic career ended last June when he was denied tenure at DePaul. Two years previously, DePaul University President Dennis Holtschneider had held up Finkelstein as an example of DePaul's commitment to freedom of enquiry; in June, he fired him.

So what did Finkelstein do that was so objectionable that he was denied a permanent position at DePaul after all his achievements? Finkelstein summed it up this way: he met the standards of tenure that DePaul required, but it wasn't enough to overcome the political opposition to his speaking out in a forceful and public way on the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Tenure is a process meant to protect academic freedom. Academic freedom is very precarious before tenure. Any professor who says or writes something controversial is in a precarious position. He or she can get put under a magnifying glass and sometimes gets scorched. This is what happened to Finkelstein.

For years Finkelstein has been a relentless, but reasoned, critic of Israel's policies and actions toward the Palestinians. He says that the Holocaust has been exploited by Israel to increase support for immoral policies. Eminent scholars post-tenure, such as Noam Chomsky and historians Peter Novick and the late Raul Hilberg, have said the same thing. Finkelstein took on Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz's book *The Case for Israel* and claimed that it was "a collection of fraud, falsification, plagiarism and nonsense." Dershowitz tried to stop publication of Finkelstein's book *Beyond Chutzpah*, even going so far as pressuring California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to direct the University of California Press not to publish the book. When Dershowitz failed in this, he sent DePaul a dossier of "Finkelstein's most egregious sins" and urged the university not to grant him tenure. Though the university sent a let-



Professor Norman Finkelstein

ter to Harvard University expressing consternation at Dershowitz' interference in Finkelstein's tenure and promotion case, DePaul's president insisted that the interference had no impact on the process or the outcome of the case. While it is customary for an academic to be given one final year to teach and find another position, Finkelstein was suddenly removed from teaching his normal two courses this fall; his office was taken away and he was told not to set foot on campus, though he would be paid for the 2007-08 academic year.

The students were angry and planning protests. In the first week of classes Finkelstein's supporters wore T-shirts reading, "We are all Professor Finkelstein." For his part, Finkelstein declined to go on academic leave and insisted on his right to teach his classes for his final terms.

Suddenly on September 5, Finkelstein resigned. He reached a settlement with the university after deciding the fight could no longer go on at DePaul. In his words, the university had given in to "external pressures climaxing in a national hysteria that tainted the tenure process."

What are we to make of this? How useful is academic freedom when it only applies fully post-tenure? Somehow, academics—Jews such as Finkelstein and non-Jews alike—are often gagged and their work invariably called "unscholarly" when it comes to even mild criticism of Israel. Because of her support of Finkelstein, another DePaul professor, Dr. Mehrene Larudee, was also recently denied tenure. In addition, Dr. Nadia Abu El-Haj, a respected anthropologist at Barnard University, was recently denied tenure because her book *Facts on the Ground* questioned Israeli archaeologists' claims regarding ancient Jewish presence in Israel.

The tenure process is supposed to weed out bad scholars, not controversial scholars. Under a concerted attack from the outside, "controversial" too often becomes synonymous with "incompetent." And those without tenure who speak out on controversial issues are very vulnerable to firing. Academic freedom is rarely exercised. Most academics tend to shun controversy. After getting a doctorate, an academic's first few years are usually his or her most innovative and productive. Denying academic freedom to professors who write or speak on contentious subjects such as Israel and Palestine will limit research into the Middle East. ♦

JUDY HAIVEN is an Associate Professor at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and a Jew.