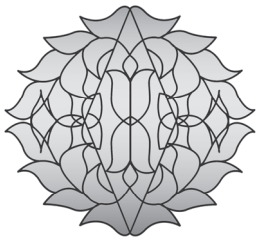


**Middle  
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**MESA '09**

4 March 2009

Leon Botstein, President  
Bard College  
PO Box 5000  
Annandale-on-Hudson NY 12504

Dear Dr. Botstein:

I am writing on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our concern that your administration's decision to terminate Joel Kovel's appointment as Distinguished Professor of Social Studies at Bard College may have been, at least in part, politically motivated. We urge you to accord Professor Kovel a full and fair hearing, in conformity with Bard's procedures and the standards commonly accepted in academic life, at which he can contest what he perceives to have been an unjust decision and a violation of his academic freedom. We also urge you to issue a public statement forcefully affirming Bard's commitment to academic freedom, especially when controversial issues are involved.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has more than 3000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

In her letter to Professor Kovel dated February 5, 2009, Dean of the College Michèle Dominy explained this decision in terms of "the imperative to distribute our resources in areas of critical academic growth and program enhancement," while you yourself have cited "fiscal constraints." We certainly understand the difficult choices that colleges and universities currently face. But we also take note of allegations that the decision not to renew Professor Kovel's contract may have been the result of his publicly expressed views on Zionism and the State of Israel. If in fact Professor Kovel's views played any part in this decision, his non-renewal would constitute a serious violation of the principles of academic freedom and a threat to all teachers and students who exercise their right to teach about, and speak out publicly on, controversial issues, including Zionism and Israel.

As you know, Joel Kovel is a well-published scholar and by all accounts a successful teacher at Bard for two decades. In recent years, however, he has been subjected to considerable criticism for his outspoken views on Zionism and Israel, and he has also been the target of a campaign to stop the University of Michigan from distributing one of his books, *Overcoming Zionism*, in the United States, on essentially political grounds.

Bard College's reputation as a bastion of liberal arts education characterized by free critical inquiry is richly and justly deserved. A full and impartial hearing for Professor Kovel would be in keeping with that tradition. We hope that you will conduct such a hearing and publish your findings.

Sincerely,

Virginia H. Aksan  
MESA President and Professor, McMaster University

cc: Joel Kovel