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The Board of Trustees of the City University of New York
535 East 80th Street
New York, NY 10075

cc: President Jeremy Travis
The faculty and students of John Jay College of Criminal Justice
899 Tenth Avenue New York, NY, 10019

May 4, 2011

To Chairperson Benno Schmidt and the Board of Trustees:

At the May 2 public meeting of the CUNY Board of Trustees, which was broadcast on CUNY television and radio, Trustee Jeffrey S. Weisenfeld delivered a grotesque caricature of my political beliefs regarding the state of Israel, concocted out of three carefully cropped, contextless quotes taken from interviews I've given, the mention of my name on the blog of someone with whom I have no connection whatsoever, and the fact that I serve on the advisory board of a political organization with which Mr. Weisenfeld strongly disagrees. As far as I'm able to conclude from the podcast of this meeting, Mr. Weisenfeld spoke for about four minutes, the first half of which was devoted to a recounting of the politics of former President of Ireland and UN Human Rights High Commissioner Mary Robinson that was as false as his description of mine.

Ms. Robinson, however, was not on public trial; I was, apparently, and at the conclusion of Mr. Weisenfeld's vicious attack on me, eight members voted to approve all the honorary degree candidates, including me, and four voted to oppose the slate if my name remained on it. Lacking the requisite nine votes to approve the entire slate, the Board, in what sounds on the podcast like a scramble to dispense with the whole business, tabled my nomination, approved the other candidates, and adjourned. Not a word was spoken in my defense.

I wasn't told in advance that my willingness to accept an honorary doctorate from John Jay would require my presence at a meeting to defend myself. As far as I know, no one who might have spoken on my behalf was notified in advance. I'm not a difficult person to find, nor am I lacking in articulate colleagues and friends who would have responded. For all his posturing as a street-tough scrapper for causes he believes in, Mr. Weisenfeld, like most bullies, prefers an unfair fight.

But far more dismaying than Mr. Weisenfeld's diatribe is the silence of the other eleven board members. Did any of you feel that your responsibilities as trustees of an august institution of higher learning included even briefly discussing the appropriateness of Mr. Weisenfeld's using a public board meeting as a platform for deriding the political opinions of someone with whom he disagrees? Did none of you feel any responsibility towards me, whose name was before you, and hence available as a target for Mr.

Weisenfeld's slander, entirely because I'd been nominated for an honor by the faculty and administration of one of your colleges? I can't adequately describe my dismay at the fact that none of you felt stirred enough by ordinary fairness to demand of one of your members that, if he was going to mount a vicious attack, he ought to adhere to standards higher than those of internet gossip. Mr. Weisenfeld declared to you that, rather than turn to "pro-Israel" websites, he'd gleaned his insights into my politics from the website of Norman Finkelstein. I find it appalling that he failed to consider a third option: familiarizing himself with any of the work I've done, my plays, screenplays, essays and speeches, for which, I assume, the faculty and administration of John Jay nominated me for an honor.

It would have taken very little effort to learn that my politics regarding the state of Israel do not resemble Mr. Weisenfeld's account. I don't intend to mount a full defense of myself or my opinions in this letter, an effort on my part which an honorary degree ought not to require. But I can't allow myself to be publicly defamed without responding:

- My questions and reservations regarding the founding of the state of Israel are connected to my conviction, drawn from my reading of American history, that democratic government must be free of ethnic or religious affiliation, and that the solution to the problems of oppressed minorities are to be found in pluralist democracy and in legal instruments like the 14th Amendment; these solutions are, like all solutions, imperfect, but they seem to me more rational, and have had a far better record of success in terms of minorities being protected from majoritarian tyranny, than have national or tribal solutions. I am very proud of being Jewish, and discussing this issue publicly has been hard; but I believe in the absolute good of public debate, and I feel that silence on the part of Jews who have questions is injurious to the life of the Jewish people. My opinion about the wisdom of the creation of a Jewish state has never been expressed in any form without a strong statement of support for Israel's right to exist, and my ardent wish that it continue to do so, something Mr. Weisenfeld conveniently left out of his remarks.

- I believe that the historical record shows, incontrovertibly, that the forced removal of Palestinians from their homes as part of the creation of the state of Israel was ethnic cleansing, a conclusion I reached mainly by reading the work of Benny Morris, an acclaimed and conservative Israeli historian whose political opinions are much more in accord with Mr. Weisenfeld's than with mine; Mr. Morris differs from Mr. Weisenfeld in bringing to his examination of history a scholar's rigor, integrity, seriousness of purpose and commitment to telling the truth.

- I won't enter into arguments about Israeli policy towards the Palestinian people since 1948, about the security fence or the conduct of the IDF, except to say that my feelings and opinions – my outrage, my grief, my terror, my moments of despair - regarding the ongoing horror in the middle east, the brunt of which has been born by the Palestinian people, but which has also cost Israelis dearly and which endangers their existence, are shared by many Jews, in Israel, in the US and around the world. My despair is kept in check by my ongoing belief in and commitment to a negotiated conclusion to the Palestinian-Israeli crisis.

- I have never supported a boycott of the state of Israel. I don't believe it will

accomplish anything positive in terms of resolving the crisis. I believe that the call for a boycott is predicated on an equation of this crisis with other situations, contemporary and historical, that is fundamentally false, the consequence of a failure of political understanding of a full and compassionate engagement with Jewish history and Jewish existence.

- I am on the advisory board of Jewish Voice for Peace, and have remained there even though I disagree with the organization about a number of issues, including the boycott. I remain affiliated because the women and men of JVP are courageous, committed people who work very hard serving the interests of peace and justice and the Jewish people, and I'm honored by my association with them. I have a capacity Mr. Weisenfeld lacks, namely the ability to tolerate and even value disagreement. Furthermore, resigning from the advisory board of JVP, or any organization, to escape the noisy censure of likes of Mr. Weisenfeld is repellent to me.

- Mr. Weisenfeld attempts to cast me as a marginal extremist, a familiar tactic on this particular issue. It's a matter of public record that this is not the case. I'm co-editor of a volume of essays on the crisis in the middle east, which includes among its 58 contributing authors many rabbis, two US Poet Laureates and two recipients of the Jerusalem Prize. I've had a long and happy affiliation with such organizations as the 92nd Street Y, The Jewish Museum and the Upper West Side JCC. My work has been recognized by such groups as The National Foundation for Jewish Culture, The Shofar Center, The Central Synagogue and Brandeis University (one of fifteen honorary degrees I've received). I state this not to present credentials, but because I refuse to allow Mr. Weisenfeld or any other self-appointed spokesman/guardian to diminish the depth or meaningfulness of my connection to the Jewish community.

I accepted the kind offer of a degree from John Jay College not because I need another award, but because I was impressed with the students and teachers there – as I have always been impressed with CUNY teachers and students - and I wanted to participate in celebrating their accomplishment. I did not expect to be publicly defamed as a result, and I believe I am owed an apology for the careless way in which my name and reputation were handled at your meeting.

I decided long ago that my job as a playwright is to try to speak and write honestly about what I believe to be true. I am interested in history and politics, and long ago I realized that people uninterested in a meaningful exchange of opinion and ideas would selectively appropriate my words to suit their purposes. It's been my experience that truth eventually triumphs over soundbites, spin and defamation, and that reason, honest inquiry, and courage, which are more appealing and more persuasive than demagoguery, will carry the day.

Sincerely,

Tony Kushner