

When I Met Alan Dershowitz

By Lyla Miklos

The Satellite

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On Wednesday, October 8th I was part of a very small live audience for Richler, Ink. Richler, Ink. is a weekly talk show hosted by Daniel Richler about literary issues. For this particular show Richler's topic was the book *The Case for Israel*, written by his guest Alan Dershowitz.

I am not an Israeli, Palestinian, Jew, Muslim or Arab, nor do I claim to know any of the complexities or intricacies of Middle Eastern politics. For me, the opportunity to listen to Mr. Dershowitz, the man who defended O.J. Simpson, Leona Helmsley and Claus von Bülow, was something I couldn't pass up. Dershowitz, without a doubt, is a fascinating public figure.

The host, Mr. Richler, explained at the opening of the show that he and his staff tried very hard to get some Palestinian student groups to attend and participate in the discussion, but they all categorically refused. Richler explained that the students did not want to legitimize Dershowitz's book nor did they want to be spoken down to with "lawyer speak" and made out to appear as "silly Arabs". Although, there was one self-identified Palestinian in the room, a brave woman named Hanadi, who was sitting directly in front of me.

I soon realized as the first half of the show (a one on one interview between Richler and Dershowitz) unfolded that this was no lightweight book club discussion. As I listened to Dershowitz explaining his views I noted how he sounded so logical, intelligent and reasonable that I almost (and I emphasize almost) took everything he said as the gospel truth.

I was jolted, when Dershowitz said the following:

"I am a true human rights advocate. . . .I wish the Palestinian students were here, because I'd point a finger at them and say name a single Palestinian human rights advocate anywhere in the world? I have never heard of one. I have heard of Palestinian, Palestinian rights advocates, I've heard of Jewish, Jewish Rights advocates, but I've also heard of Jewish human rights advocates. I've spent my life defending the rights of Tibetans, Chechens, ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union and people who want to kill me. . . .People like [me] are true human rights

advocates. . . .When has a Palestinian ever spoken out on behalf of anyone's human rights, but Palestinian human rights?"

The latter half of the show was a question and answer session moderated by Richler. It was at this time that I took Dershowitz to task on his definition of human rights advocate and his statement that no Palestinian human rights advocates exist. I found his definition narrow and limited and was disturbed by his glib generalization of Palestinians and their lack of human rights activists. I also felt his assertion that since he didn't personally know a Palestinian human rights advocate none existed was a rather inane and puerile argument.

Dershowitz's defense of his definition of human rights advocate was that if you are a part of an oppressed minority (ex: black, women, gay, disabled . . . etc.) and you are also an activist for that oppressed group's rights, you are not a human rights activists, you are simply self-serving. I found this to be an absurd and elitist spin on the definition of human rights activist. So I guess unless I am an altruistic or philanthropic white, straight, rich and able-bodied male I couldn't possibly be a human rights activist because I may be directly affected and hence see my life improved by the cause I am fighting for? By Dershowitz's reasoning Nobel Peace Prize winner Martin Luther King Jr. couldn't be a human rights activist because he was a black man fighting for black rights.

As a queer rights activist my blood was boiling over the arrogance of Dershowitz's privileged stance. Unless a rich, white, straight male charging on his white horse is willing to be an advocate for my oppressed group's cause it has no legitimacy? As an activist and member of an oppressed group, queers, I see our struggle as a worldwide struggle. The rights we fight for not only affect us as Canadians or as queers, but can have a ripple effect throughout the world. Change here, does inspire change elsewhere and can affect humans across the globe. Members of an oppressed group who rally against the oppression they face, whether it be racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, violence, anti-Semitism, poverty, classism, ethnocentrism or a litany of other injustices, not only improve the fate and destiny of the their specific group, but the fate and destiny of all humanity and hence they are all human rights activists. My struggle as a queer woman is a universal struggle and to diminish it and say my struggle is a self-serving one is short sighted, exclusionary and insulting.

Several other guests took Dershowitz to task on a variety of other issues. Hanadi, the lone Palestinian in the room found his comments didn't constructively move the debate or the issues forward. Peter Silverman, the host of "Silverman Helps"

and a self-proclaimed Zionist who fought in the Israeli army during the 1960's, vehemently disagreed with Dershowitz's statement that no Israeli had ever intentionally killed a Palestinian civilian. Host Richler and another guest also took great offense to Dershowitz's use of the term "child terrorist". It was a challenging discussion. Many of the issues were beyond my knowledge and understanding and I felt far too uninformed to comment on political and historical specifics.

After the taping had finished I spoke with Mr. Silverman about his comments and said to him: Who cares who was there first or who did what to whom. It doesn't matter anymore. Israelis and Palestinians must stop killing each other and instead find a way to be able to live together in peace. Only then can their two societies truly thrive.

I may not be an Israeli or a Palestinian, but as a fellow citizen of this planet and as a human rights activist, yes human rights activist, my heart bleeds for any group who must live with hate and destruction day in and day out. I can't even imagine having to live in the state of constant fear that Israelis and Palestinians do. All I know is that I would love to watch the evening news and no longer see the aftermath of a suicide bombing, politicians talk about reprisals, families demanding revenge or extremists absolutely refusing to even consider compromise. My heart yearns to hear solutions and see the dream of peace in the Middle East become a reality.

Lyla Miklos is a queer/human rights activist, national television programmer, local radio broadcaster, writer, artist and member of The Strengthening Hamilton's Community Initiative's Community Roundtable. The Richler, Ink. episode on Alan Dershowitz and his book "The Case For Israel" will air on Bravo on Thursday, October 23, 2003 at 7:30pm EST and on BookTelevision on Friday, October 24, 2003 at 9:30pm EST.