

The Harvard Crimson

Fifty Years of Alan Dershowitz

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“I don’t believe in retirement, I believe in changing careers,” former Harvard Law School professor Alan M. Dershowitz tells me over the phone on his way to Logan Airport, where he will board a plane to Paris. He officially retired from the Law School this December, but he intends his retired life to be far from relaxing. “My retirement from Harvard reflects the fact that I’ve been doing this for 50 consecutive years and at age 75, I wanted to try something different,” he says. “My plans are to be even more active than I’ve ever been before.”

Dershowitz begins to tell me his life story, a speech that he’s clearly given countless times and has down perfectly. He speaks quickly and efficiently—this man has places to go. He is the classic self-made man: he grew up in Brooklyn, New York, with two working parents, neither of whom had gone to college. He was a terrible elementary and high school student, he says, with about a 68 percent average. “I made it to Brooklyn College by the skin of my teeth,” he recounts. His family would not have been able to afford tuition, but luckily, attending Brooklyn College was free at the time. Dershowitz improved his grades, earning straight A’s in college and then at Yale Law School. In 1964, at the age of 25, he began teaching at Harvard, soon becoming one of the youngest tenured professors at the University. “And that’s all I’ve been doing,” he says. “I’ve had one job in my life—a professor at Harvard—and I’ve had it for 50 years.”

Clearly, teaching at Harvard is not all he has been doing. According to the biographical statement on his website, he has litigated 38 homicide cases and authored 30 fiction and non-fiction works. He has won over 100 court cases and lectured to over a million people across the globe.

I ask Dershowitz what he remembers about his first year teaching at Harvard Law School. “I remember every single student that I called on in my class,” he responds confidently. “I remember where they all sat.” In that year alone, he taught CNN commentator David Gergen, politician William Bennett, and American diplomat Stuart Eizenstat. He explains that a third of his students were older than he was. “I was scared out of my wits,” he claims, though it’s difficult to believe that this man, who practically beams confidence, has ever felt nervous.

Regardless, Dershowitz managed to succeed. “At the end of the first year, I got the highest ranking of any teacher in terms of teaching,” he tells me, and then reiterates, “I was 25, and I got the highest teacher ranking. So I was very pleased.” Since that first year, Dershowitz has instructed over 10,000 students, including those in the freshman seminar he’s taught for about a decade. Dershowitz says he is considering returning to Harvard in future years to teach the seminar, entitled “Where Does Your Morality Come From?” once again.

As a professor with extensive time in the courtroom, Dershowitz says he has been able to “bring a lot of practical experience into the classroom.” He explains that this balance between the theoretical and the practical has been one of his biggest contributions to Harvard. “I think I’ve made the classroom more interesting by bringing in my practical experience,” he says, “and I’ve made myself a better lawyer by bringing my academic experience into the courtroom.”

Dershowitz also counts his contributions towards making it “easier for Jewish students to express their Jewish values and their support for Israel,” as one of his biggest accomplishments at the University. When he first came, he says, people called him the “first Jewish Jew at Harvard.” He would often quote Jewish sources in his class, was active in Jewish events on campus, and did not hold class on Jewish holidays. “I didn’t try to hide my identity,” Dershowitz said. When he was up for tenure, a colleague warned him that “I was wearing my Jewishness on my sleeve,” which would hurt his chances. Today, being Jewish at Harvard...is very different from what it was five decades ago, he says, as Harvard is “a much more accepting, tolerant place.”

Though times have changed, Dershowitz is still known at Harvard and beyond for stirring up controversy—he is a man completely unphased when others disagree with him. I ask him which of his views have been most criticized at Harvard, to which he responds that his most controversial beliefs are his support for Israel and his claim that the Boycotts, Divestment, and Sanctions, BDS, movement against Israel, is “both immoral and also hurts the peace process.” He adds that students have often objected to views he has expressed, and he defends their right to do so.

“But look,” he states proudly, “I’m controversial all over the world.” He recently wrote a piece for The Australian opposing the Australian government’s ban on Holocaust denial. “I believe strongly in free speech,” he explains to me. “I believe that Nazis have a right to speak freely, anti-Israel people have the right to speak freely, the BDS people have the right to speak freely, and Holocaust deniers.... When they express their views, I want to be there to express my views.” As a result of his article, he says, the Jewish community in Australia has claimed that he is supporting Holocaust denial. Dershowitz does not seem to be too bothered by this. The approval of others does not sit high on his priority list.

“I’ve stuck to my principles over my years,” Dershowitz says. “Sometimes it’s hard to understand my principles. Sometimes even my mother doesn’t understand my principles. But I’m too old to change.”

Dershowitz says that his position on the political spectrum has not altered at all. He has always identified as strongly liberal, but he believes that the views of people around him have changed, specifically with regard to Israel, which he says used to be very much a liberal cause. Without any prompting on my end, he delves into his opinions on the matter, explaining that to him, this diminishing support from the left is “appalling.” He continues, “If you’re a liberal and a progressive, you should support the country in the world that has the best record on women’s rights, on environmental rights, on gay rights, and that’s Israel.”

Dershowitz himself is considering becoming an Israeli citizen in response to the BDS campaign. He wants to be able to say, “if you boycott an Israeli, you have to boycott me.” Just today, he tells me, he was invited to contribute an article to a British magazine, and he responded by saying “if you would not have invited an Israeli, then you can’t invite me.” He believes this is “an appropriate way of fighting back against the immorality of singling out Israel for a BDS campaign.”

I ask if there has ever been an instance where the free speech of Harvard students was restricted by the administration, and if he got involved. “I can tell you they tried, but I think I’ve made it impossible for them to do it,” he says. “I have been on the forefront of maintaining free speech and free academic speech at Harvard.”

When Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat died, a group of Palestinian students at Harvard asked Dershowitz if he would help them gain the right to raise the Palestinian flag in Harvard Yard. He agreed to represent the Palestinian students on grounds of his support for free speech, and they were able to raise the flag. However, Dershowitz simultaneously issued statements saying that “I didn’t support what they stood for in raising the flag, and that I thought [Arafat] was a horrible, horrible murderer,” he says. In this case, free speech allowed for both the Palestinian students’ tribute to Arafat, and for his response.

Dershowitz has also taken a stand against what he calls the discriminatory nature of final clubs at Harvard. “I myself have never belonged to and would never belong to a club that picks and chooses based on how cool you are,” he says, “so I myself don’t approve of final clubs.”

Now, after his “retirement” from Harvard, Dershowitz says, “I want to remain active as long as I can.” He boasts that he currently receives calls from political and business leaders all over the world, seeking his advice and consultation. He just finished representing the former president of Ukraine, and is now consulting on a case involving the former prime minister of Pakistan. He’s finishing up his next book, entitled “Abraham: The World’s First (But Certainly not Last) Jewish Lawyer.” It is a history of lawyers with a focus on Jewish lawyers. He is also working on an opera.

Dershowitz is about to board his plane, so we have to wrap up our conversation. I ask what he would tell his students if he could just give one piece of advice. “Truth is not an end result, it’s a process,” he says. “Don’t expect simple answers—we live in an extraordinarily complex world.”