

STATEMENT BY PRESIDENT NORMAN LAMM

3/25/85

I am pleased to respond to the invitation of Commentator to comment on the recent controversy concerning the revocation of an invitation to an official of the Arab League to address the Yeshiva College student body at the invitation of the Political Science Society.

Let me make it clear at the outset that financial considerations played absolutely no role in the decision. First, the Dean to whom this statement was attributed assures me that he never said anything of the sort, certainly not in the context in which it was reported. Second, the Vice President who made the decision (I was in Israel at the time and learned about it only upon my return, after the fact) had nothing of the sort in mind. It is a non-issue -- indeed, a nonsense issue. To raise it seriously is an unworthy canard.

The problem at hand has an importance that goes beyond the details of this particular controversy. The Commentator statement pointing to such larger issues is therefore essentially correct. But they require analysis on a larger canvass and it is to this that I address myself, despite the handicap of condensing matters of fundamental import to the limited space of a newspaper column.

The very nature of the enterprise of Yeshiva University is unique. The name "Yeshiva University" itself suggests our mission of Torah Umadda -- one of breath-taking breadth, that is chovek zero'ot olam. We are both a Yeshiva and a University, and our ultimate goal is to integrate them as best we can, a symbiosis that cannot be effected in a simple chatecism that is handed out at Freshman Orientation or with one's B.A. Whoever expects pat answers, and is unprepared for the long and arduous effort that takes at least a life-time, does not understand what we are all about and is doomed to disappointment.

Unquestionably, while this synthesis can be achieved, and indeed has been achieved even by many of those most vocal about the impossibility of attaining it, there are built-in conflicts at every step of this rocky and glorious road. Yeshiva and University each has its own immanent rules, its characteristic patterns and individual styles and disparate methods. It is to be expected that they will often contradict each other and point in different directions. This in no wise negates the unity of the truth to which both aspire. The empirical havdalah of their day-to-day relationships does not belie the kiddush, the sanctification of the profane, as Rav Kook so beautifully formulated our final desideratum. But despite the ultimate metaphysical harmony of both spheres, there most certainly are, in the jagged and muddled present, opportunities for conflict. Hardly a week goes by that I am not called upon to deal with such problems in some form or another.



The tension between these two poles is a dialectical one, and like every genuine dialectic it offends the simple-minded who seek peace of mind at the expense of a vision of truth. The same kind of dialectic is involved, for instance, in the tension between Science and Religion. Unless one abandons either of these, there will always be the potential for both collision and greatness, no matter how one chooses to resolve the problems. Constantly confronting this dynamic tension leaves one with frazzled nerves -- but it is by all means worth the effort. "It is best that you grasp the one without letting go of the other, for the one who fears God will do his duty by both," King Solomon advised us (Eccl. 7:18).

Indeed, the Rav has reminded us more than once that the Halakhah itself reveals constant dialectical tensions which lie at the very heart of its method. Contradictions, clashing values, the need to choose sometimes one principle and sometimes another -- these are the very stuff of Halakhah. Dialectic, the collision of ideas and their novel resolutions and further conflicts, is the only proper response to the multi-faceted nature of reality one would expect of a divinely revealed Halakhah. A Commentator report of May 23, 1968 quotes the Rav: "Judaism does not operate with the law of the excluded middle or the principle of non-contradiction. Judaism believes that something can be in two frames of reference at the same time, although they may be mutually exclusive."

The moment we cut out any half of this bipolarity -- Yeshiva or University, Torah or Maddda -- we are no longer Yeshiva University. We are either Lakewood or Columbia -- a yeshiva with some college-level vocational courses, or a University with some traditional-type Judaic courses -- but we have destroyed the gestalt of our unique institution. As long as we maintain what we are, the tensions will be trying and sometimes exasperating, but never boring. The task of accomodating Torah and Maddda, kodesh and chol, was not meant for spiritual Nirvana-seekers or psychological cowards. It's tough -- but it's great. The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno concludes his magnum opus with the words, "May God deny you peace, but grant you glory." You can't have both.

Because of the all-encompassing nature of Torah Umadda, it often appears that we straddle the fence. If straddling is the result of indecisiveness or of a lack of an overall point of view, then it is certainly deserving of criticism. But occasionally "straddling the fence" can be the consequence of a deep awareness of the complexity of life and of Torah, a keen sensitivity to the dialectical nature of both life and Torah, and the knowledge that therefore particular situations require different solutions based upon a finely honed intuition. (Halakhah, despite its codification, holds out the possibility of mutiple answers to questions. See my article in the very first



issue of the Cardozo Law Review.)

I recognize quite well that the lack of a single and definitive response to all possible questions is frustrating to those who seek The Answer to every conceivable problem. The reaction of such people is a charge of confusion in high places, lack of policy or leadership or guts. But ideological impatience is not a sign of intellectual maturity. I would rather that we all learn to think problems through anew each time a modification appears, on the grounds that each situation requires fresh thinking (ein le'dayyan ela mah she'enav ro'ot), and if in the process we seem to straddle the fence -- well, the view from the top of the fence, dangerous though that perch is, is wider and broader than from either side...

With this as background, let me turn to the issue at hand.

The question of the impropriety of Yeshiva hosting an Arab League spokesman versus the principle of academic freedom is a fine example of the kind of question that defines our ongoing dilemma. Where else but at Yeshiva University would such a problem arise?

I do not see any halakhic issue involved here. The question is one of propriety as an institution which has as its goal the perpetuation of the Jewish people, of Jewish learning and tradition and dignity, of Talmud Torah and all that goes with it -- and that at the same time subscribes to the academic enterprise as does every real univeristy which takes culture and learning seriously.

Clearly, there is something deeply offensive about Yeshiva College students hosting an apologist for terrorists and international hooligans who rejoice at the Zionism-Racism equation. The instinctive revulsion experienced by so many students and faculty members is no less genuine than the principle of freedom cherished by those who extended the invitation and opposed its revocation.

Yet there are good arguments that can be and have been made for those who hold out for academic freedom on this issue. A university should be open to all ideas, even unpopular ones. It should not be averse to hearing from non-conformists. It should, furthermore, hear such opinions from those who espouse them, unmediated by those who merely teach them.

However, closer scrutiny reveals some serious questions about the thesis of those who assert academic freedom. Theoretically, it is a truism that no freedom is morally or even legally absolute. Countervailing rights and obligations must also be considered. And on a practical level, even the most liberal institutions have shown a remarkable capacity to interpret academic freedom in rather parochial and partisan terms. How many law schools in our city have given a serious hearing to South African spokesmen on behalf of apartheid? How



many medical schools have extended similar courtesies to "pro-life" advocates on the abortion issue? It was not too long ago that Ambassador Kirkpatrick was denied the lectern at a prominent liberal college because of her views on Central America.

Closer to home: How many of us here in our undergraduate schools would be ready to invite the PLO "guerillas" who murdered one of our former students in cold blood in Hebron? A representative of the American Nazi Party? Farrakhan? A leader of the "Jews for Jesus?" A "revisionist" who asserts that the Holocaust never occurred?

This reductio ad absurdum is not meant to deny the validity of the policy of academic freedom which I wholeheartedly espouse and practice. It is meant only to demonstrate that judgment calls are necessary, that there are distinctions to be made that are not easy to analyze, that the lines are not as clearly drawn as some would have us believe. We can all agree that academic freedom is most certainly a precious part of our Western heritage, and that there are instances when it is inapplicable -- and that it is not always easy to give predictable and pat answers to all such questions. That is certainly true of a university which is more than an academic factory or a neutral forum with no transcendent mission. A university that has a soul will have problems, and its members would do well at least to admit to a degree of perplexity. One may have strong opinions on a matter of this sort, but self-righteous posturing by partisans of either position is faintly comical.

On balance, I come down on the side of denying Yeshiva University's hospitality to the Arab League representative, albeit with full respect and understanding for those who issued the invitation. In the conflict of values, I find more validity to the view that Yeshiva University stands for something, and that this value outweighs the good of allowing students to hear a contrary view specifically from the mouth of the kind of speaker invited.

The Arab League representatives at the United Nations join delegates of all other Arab states who do not recognize Israel in leaving the chambers of that organization when the Israeli delegate rises to speak. Why should we, Jews with such profound links to Israel, reward such callous discourtesy with an invitation to our own home? Such conduct forfeits their right to be heard by any upright person, Israeli or non-Israeli, Zionist or anti-Zionist, Jew or non-Jew.

Students have invited Arab speakers before. The Ambassador of Egypt spoke here, and no one questioned his right to do so, despite the fact that Egypt, while technically at peace with Israel, is hardly sympathetic to Zionism. If students wish to



hear views unpopular on our campus they can, if they wish, invite Palestinian intellectuals who do not officially represent governments sworn to destroy the State of Israel. (They might even try to invite Orthodox Jewish doves on the Territories question! Why only Kahane?) To extend our hospitality to the "Ambassador" of a non-nation (the Arab League) confers upon it a legitimacy which is utterly undeserved.

No one is denying the rights of students to hear his opinions. No student was ever threatened with discipline for inviting him off campus. (Certainly, no faculty member has, to my knowledge, ever been denied the right to utter controversial opinions.) But the symbolic significance of Yeshiva inviting such a bitter and implacable enemy not only of the State of Israel but of the Jewish people to its campus -- that is too repugnant, too outrageous, for this institution to accept with equanimity.