

Yeshiva University / Office of the President



December 30, 1986

Mr. Herbert Tenzer
Tenzer, Greenblatt, Fallon
& Kaplan
405 Lexington Avenue
New York, NY 10174

Dear Herbert:

I am responding to your letter of December 24th, concerning the letter you received from Alfred Moses of The American Jewish committee about a meeting scheduled for January 20, 1987.

I feel that Jewish unity is always important, perhaps more so now, when it is under attack, than it ever was before. I also am heartily in favor of mutual respect and the discussion of inter-denominational differences with dignity and delicacy.

However, a few caveats: First, as the one who first raised the issue of a joint Bet Din last March (at the CIAL Conference at which you were present), I believe I have the moral right to suggest that the best way to kill the plan is to talk too much about it. Indeed, I am currently deeply involved in "quiet diplomacy" in attempting to realize this dream -- a difficult if not impossible task. Now, suddenly, everyone seems to be getting into the act. A couple of months ago I had a difficult time persuading Hillel chaplains not to take the initiative in establishing their own "Joint Bet Din," and I had to refuse to address their group about it. Of course, they had no choice but to accept my refusal to go along with them, but they are certainly going to make an issue of it. Now the American Jewish Committee, a much more prestigious group, is trying to do the same thing. With all respect for their good intentions, which I do not in the least doubt, this will destroy any possibility that I or others may have of trying to bring along Orthodox Jews to what may be, for Orthodoxy, a rather risky venture.

I would therefore strongly urge that you attend the meeting and discourage them from making any public pronouncements about the matter, or even discussing it in large public groups, if they really want it to succeed. The road to Hell, as George Bernard Shaw said, is paved with good intentions. And my amendment reads that the road to communal chaos is paved with good will and with

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three cheers for unity. No self-respecting Orthodox leader will, despite his most profound concern for Jewish unity, allow himself to be brow beaten by press releases into violating his most sacred principles of commitment to the Halakhah. We are here dealing with a very, very delicate matter, and the American Jewish Committee holding open meetings about the issue is tantamount to performing neurosurgery with a butcher's cleaver. Please, please dissuade them from this.

I must share with you my fear that the whole intracomunal discussion about Jewish unity has taken a nasty turn. It has become, in the hands of many, a weapon with which to bludgeon Orthodox Jews. Thus, the very people who broke the ranks of Jewish unity by tolerating intermarriage without benefit of even Reform conversion, who allow their members to co-officiate at weddings with priests and ministers, and who have now given us the gift of "patrilineal" rulings, attack the Orthodox for not recognizing their conversions and not according halakhic validity to their rabbis. I frankly resent finding myself on the defensive with regard to Jewish unity when speaking with those who have followed a course of historic religious and cultural vandalism in their insensitive rejection of the very institutions and laws that have kept us Jews together throughout the millennia.

You know, Herbert, that I speak as a "moderate" in the Orthodox camp, and that my talk at CLAL (and the subsequent publication of that address in MOMENT Magazine -- I send you a copy enclosed) was not undertaken without considerable risk. I said what I said and wrote what I wrote because I believe in it and because our own "crazies" in Israel and here have made us appear as dangerous Neanderthals. Someone, somehow, had to respond to the hillul ha-Shem. But that does not mean that we can allow the anti-Orthodox factions -- which have now taken on new life, a new aggressiveness, and almost a kind of truculence -- to beat us unjustly with the club of "Jewish unity." Can you imagine what would have happened had we Orthodox Jews proposed to boycott UJA if our every demand in Israel was not met by the Government? Yet that is precisely what has been recommended by Alex Schindler and others. We have never announced a boycott of Members of Knesset who voted against our Orthodox interests, yet that is exactly what the Conservative Movement in America has done with those MK's who voted on the "Who Is A Jew" question in a way that

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displeased Conservative leadership. The Reform and Conservative groups have now combined to demand that The Jewish Agency and World Zionist Organization support their movements in Israel on an across the board fashion, instead of supporting institutions according to need and numbers of people served. And we -- yes, we -- are regarded as the major threat to Jewish unity!

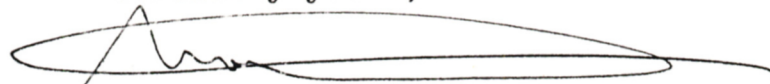
If I sound a bit bitter, Herbert, it is because I am suspicious of thinking in slogans instead of issues, and because I detect the beginnings of a "bloc" that will eventually become nakedly anti-Orthodox and destructive. I hope I am wrong.

Hence, I believe it important for you to attend these meetings, and to speak up strongly and proudly for the view of Orthodox Judaism and its halakhic commitment at the same time that you join the much-needed effort to enhance Jewish unity. It is not at all a simple task. We Orthodox Jews are our own worst enemies. Our extremists are truly a lunatic fringe, and they make it all the more difficult for us to present ourselves as we like to think we are: rational people with a profound commitment to Torah, reasonable Jews who seek the maximum of tolerance with the minimum peril to our values and principles. But, of course, only a Jew and lawyer of the stature of Herbert Tenzer can be asked to undertake that kind of difficult task...

Forgive the length of this response, but I think you deserve it of me. I would appreciate it if, at least for the while, this letter not be made public.

Mindy joins me in warmest regards to Florrie, for whose health we pray, and best wishes to all of you for a happy Hanukkah.

Cordially yours,



NORMAN LAMM
President

NL:is
Enc.