

*Answer
F-1405*

Taj Mahal Hotel, Room No. 115, 1st Floor,
Bombay 1. February 6, 1961.

Dear Haham Gaon,

I sincerely regret that because of our different schedules it was impossible for me to meet you personally in England to carry on the conversation we had begun in New York on the problems of Indian Jewry. I do hope, however, that as soon as my reports are written up after my return to New York please G-d, copies will be made available to you.

Meanwhile I am turning to you on a problem of immediate importance. I have just returned to Bombay from Calcutta where the community is now paralysed because of controversies precipitated by Beth Din policies and by personality problems with Rabbi [REDACTED].

As of this past week the Jewish Association has terminated the contract of [REDACTED]. Two factions, pro and anti-Rabbi, are stubbornly opposed to each other. The straw that broke the camel's back was the problem of how strict to be in accepting converts. The Beth Din had adopted a policy which was almost absolutely exclusivist. [REDACTED] favoured a more liberal attitude. The latter thereupon proceeded to perform his own conversion without Beth Din's authorisation and the entire Beth Din resigned. Since then the local Hazanim have undertaken to perform conversions upon their own authority, but this has largely been stopped due to the exertions of [REDACTED] and others. The Jewish Association has publicly called for elections to the Beth Din in about two weeks.

At a conversation with all factions - and I shall give you many more details at some later date - I have got their agreement to postpone elections to Beth Din, to organise synagogues under the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of India and to have the Union be the sponsoring agency of the Beth Din. All factions agreed to submit to the discipline of the Beth Din ~~beforehand~~ provided that all members of the Beth Din will subscribe to the general principles I have proposed pending your approval.

I have told them that I will not give them the exact talks of my proposals, but that it will officially have to come from you. You may either accept my proposals, reject them completely, or modify them as you see fit. If the general idea is adhered to, I think there is a good chance to rectify the almost hopeless situation in Calcutta. You will note that my proposals follow generally the policy pragmatically adopted by most orthodox Rabbis in the United States.

As for Rabbi [REDACTED] I do not know how long he will continue in Calcutta. He hesitated about belonging to Beth Din of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of India because he is a member of the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly. I did not press the point. On the contrary I proposed the formula for his relation with the Beth Din, according to which he will not be a member of the Beth Din, but will execute its decisions etc. Both he and the opposition were satisfied with the formula.

I might add that I was puzzled by his attitude towards Gittim and Halizah. It was my understanding that neither you nor Rabbi Sassoon had approved of his assumption of authority in these matters. Yet he informs me that he has been freely issuing both, and in fact in recent months has been his own Sofer. He showed me the procedure he used. It is a mimeograph English programme. Perhaps you can do something about this. Off hand I might recommend - although I do not know if this is feasible - that you have him prepare the Harshaah in Calcutta, that the Beth Din in London write the Get and post it to Calcutta where it will be delivered to the wife. Whatever, I leave this in your most competent hands.

I would deeply appreciate if you will communicate with me in New York of your reaction to the enclosed. If you accept it in toto, or make minor changes, please notify me and send a copy of the letter, provided it is not confidential, to [REDACTED], 67 Park Street, Calcutta.

With all best regards and most respectfully

Haham Dr. Solomon Gaon,
4 Ashworth Road, Maida Vale, London W.9

(Rabbi Norman Lamm)