

August 28, 1966

Dear Rabbi Lamm,

I want to write to you in order to tell you that I deeply admire your religious convictions, your broad range of learning, and your ability to write clearly with much depth. No one more than I can appreciate it since I along with you like to base a personal philosophy of life within the framework of Judaism. I have read your reply to the questions posed in Commentary in the August symposium and have also had occasion to read some things you wrote in Tradition and Jewish Life magazines. In general I am very happy to see that the orthodox rabbinate is making its thinking known to many who have long since left Orthodoxy or to those Jews in the United States whose perspective of Judaism is seen through anything but learned and community minded scholars.

As a young man of age 26 and a graduate of the University of Wisconsin in Madison in political science along with having a religious background, I have found many enjoyable hours reading about Judaism. My readings have included Jewish Leaders by Leo Jung, Studies in Judaism by Solomon Schechter, God, Man, and History by Eliezer Berkovits, Judaism Eternal by Samson Raphael Hirsch, Students, Scholars and Saints by Louis Ginzburg, Akiba ben Joseph by Louis Finklestein, The Philosophy of Purpose by Samuel Belkin, Reconstructionism, A Critical Approach by Eliezer Berkovits, Judaism, A Historical Presentation by Isidore Epstein, A History of the Jewish People by Marx and Margolies and others. I am also a regular subscriber for the past 13 months to the Jewish Press newspaper. I usually do not buy or read Commentary except on special occasions for I have been dismayed at its lack of Jewish content.

I have wondered what the original differences were between the Orthodox and the Conservative were when Judaism was being transplanted in large numbers from Eastern Europe to the United States. Certainly much of what was transplanted was done by a very few. Perhaps Solomon Schechter, though extremely learned and a believing Jew, had a somewhat westernized mentality when he started the Jewish Theological Seminary which was different from the Polish mentality of those Jews who went straight from Eastern Europe to New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and other cities without stopping off in such Western countries as Vienna, Austria and London, England. I have not been able to notice halachic differences between the original founders of the Seminary and Orthodoxy. Another thing that I am amazed at is that the Jewish people developed a strong and active Zionist movement in America even though the large majority never intended to settle 6,000 miles away in Israel even if there were to be an Israel. And in the past 18 years a very few people who were Zionists have moved from the United States to Israel. The Yiddish language which was a cultural characteristic to many Jewish people who were first generation Jews in the United States hardly is noticeable among second and third generation Jews in their family and professional lives.

I feel that the most important thing to do right now is to close the gap between the intensive learning and observances found in the various Yeshivas in the United States and Jewish life as well as life in general in our open society. This does not mean that Jewish religious values must be watered down but rather that the values should be more incorporated into the lives of U.S. Jewry than exists today. Perhaps a study session should be incorporated during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services as well as when ever large masses of Jews enter the

Synagogue. Rabbis who do not teach Judaism should be replaced by rabbis who do teach Judaism. I believe our young college age Jews in the United States today do want more meaning out of life than they are getting and Judaism could fill this present void. Naturally, I believe in a strong high school Jewish education taught by teachers who are believing Jews as well as by teachers who are sufficiently learned. The knowledge of Judaism does not only have to come forth from classical Yeshivas but can come forth in other type setups. The Jewish student is also operating in an American environment where as you well know he goes to public schools and secular universities. With a positive home environment and a good Jewish education Judaism can enter the thinking & lives of the United States Jews. The role of the Orthodox synagogue apparently is not great enough in many communities to play a decisive factor in the religious makeup of the community. I believe that Orthodoxy, though it may be the most demanding perspective of all our American Jewish religious groupings, is best qualified to teach Judaism to American Jewry if it maintains an optimistic philosophy and is willing to take into account the sociology of the United States, a country of six million Jews living in freedom under the American flag. So far in this country Orthodoxy has acknowledged many violations of halacha according to bans issued by the present day interpreters of halacha and has not come to grips with some very serious problems as to how Jews live their lives in this country. In all honesty, the Shulchan Orach is a closed book for the vast majority of Klal Yisroel. Why has it taken so many years to either develop or adapt the halachic system to the American environment? Is the halachic system just a system for Jewish societies of the past and not for the present? Perhaps a study and discussion session could be innovated right before the Mussaf service at Sabbath services which could be led by the rabbi encouraging members of the congregation to participate. The subject matter could center around the sedra of the week. Along with reminding members to buy their seats for the High Holidays well in advance as is the case in most synagogues, the rabbi could recommend a reading list of Jewish books that he feels would enhance the Jewish scholarship for the coming year. This list could be included in the congregations reminder to buy their seats or given to the members as they purchase their tickets.

In closing I would like to say that the Chasidim with all their wonderful qualities will not be able for the most part to give us much in the way of a rational approach to modern Jewish thought for the United States. I say this because the Chasidic movement was largely based on and for ignorant masses of Jews. I think that Jews today though they may be ignorant do not like to be looked down to as ignorant. I feel that Jews must be taught that according to Judaism, as you so well explained in Commentary there is no such a thing as separating the ritual from the ethical. This is only abstract intelligence looking at Judaism that says the two are separate. In developing a system of modern Jewish thought I suggest that the following men and their works be included; (1.) Moses Luzzato, Meshullath Yescharim (2.) Rabbi Akeba Eger (3.) Vilna Gaon (4.) Moses Mendelsohn (4.) Samuel David Luzzatto (5.) Samson Raphael and his commentaries (6.) Israel Hildeshimer (7.) Issac Elchanan Spektor (8.) Israel Salanter (9.) Baal Shem Tov (10.) Chofetz Chaim (11.) Rav Kook (12.) Chazon Ish (13.) Joseph Hertz (14.) Solomon Schechter (15.) Louis Ginzburg (16.) Solomon Goldman and his answers to Welhausen (17.) Issac Lesser.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this letter. With many wishes for much continued success.

Sincerely,

Sanford Altschul
Sanford M. Altschul