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Synagogue Council of America
Review Committee
REPORT**

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POSITION PAPER FOR REMAINING IN SCA

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Five years ago I was asked to submit, to a special study panel of the Orthodox Union, a draft of the reasons why we ought not to secede from the Synagogue Council. I now have been asked to do so again. As I look over my paper of 1969, I am convinced I can let almost the whole thing stand as is. Indeed, it is depressing how little things have changed, and how caught up we are in a nexus of inconsequentiality!

It seems to be the fate of Orthodoxy, at least in this country, that its major battles are fought over matters of little or no genuine significance. We have allowed truly important matters to be bypassed, and have chosen what are, relatively speaking, trivialities on which to stage our strongest stands. The Orthodox Union, as a more or less centrist group, seems peculiarly afflicted by this penchant for the petty. Once again we are evoking great principles and wasting precious time and risking wounded pride and injured feelings on an issue which is of concern as a symbol, but unimportant substantively.

From everything that I have heard about the Synagogue Council of America (SCA), it has a limited scope of activity. It is not the kind of organization which will seriously affect the destiny of Torah and American Jewry one way or another. I do not by any means wish to deprecate the value of SCA. It has its place in the community and its functions to perform. In the course of the past several years I have intermittently accepted some assignments from the SCA, and have had occasion to observe its activities and, in most cases, to admire its efficiency and its adherence to the principles upon which the Orthodox groups have conditioned their affiliation with it. But it certainly does not appear to me to be worthy of the dissension it has produced in our ranks. We will survive with it, and without it. It is almost farcical how we have succeeded in making a "tzimmes" *yesh me'ayin*.

Nevertheless even insignificant issues must be met if they are thrust upon us against our will. The SCA question has been blown up to unrecognizable dimensions by those who have insisted upon the Union's withdrawal. I have no reason to regret the comment I made some years ago, which seems to have irritated a number of my colleagues, namely, that the demand for secession is a "dull, obsessive litany." Indeed, it becomes duller with repetition. It is with considerable reluctance, therefore, that I undertake (for the second time!) to set down even these few comments for consideration.

The Study Panel which deliberated on these matters some five years ago — and SCA was only the most controversial of the so-called "umbrella"

groups discussed — performed its task conscientiously and efficiently, at great expense in time and convenience. We heard testimony from a number of distinguished leaders of the community. I personally came to the hearings determined that I would lay aside my own bias and listen with an open mind. Alas, I heard no new idea, listened to no new argument, learned no new insight. Nothing was said that had not already been said or suggested before. I regret to say that we engaged in an exercise in well-intentioned futility.

This past year, the issue was opened up again (under circumstances that do not elicit my unrestrained admiration). I heard the deliberations, and participated in them, and was seized with a bad case of *deja vu*. The same thing all over again! The only “new” element was what supposedly precipitated this new institutional convulsion — the intercession of the Conservative and Reform groups with the Israeli government on behalf of the status quo on the “Who is a Jew?” crisis, and their call for recognition of their clergy as qualified to perform conversions. Now, I agree that their initiative was contemptible, coming as it did in a moment of political weakness and national instability following the Yom Kippur War. Their policy was manipulative and opportunistic. But all of this is irrelevant to the subject at hand. We have made it clear all along that affiliation with the SCA may in no way be construed as approval of the other groups, and that we retain complete independence on any principle we deem vital. But the simple consideration of reciprocity means that these groups retain *their* freedom to pursue *their* objectives, no matter how reprehensible we may consider them. We cannot, in the framework of a common organization, deny to them rights that we reserve to ourselves, and it is no great tribute to our institutional maturity that, at every sign of crisis or controversy, we threaten to pick up our marbles and go home.

As I have stated, the issue of continued membership in or secession from the SCA is chiefly of symbolic value. It is clear to me that this is the main motivation of the Orthodox right wing in seizing on this issue. (There is nothing wrong in that kind of strategy *per se*; my only objection is that all kinds of extraneous reasons are conjured up that, in effect, inflate the immediate organizational question out of all proportion to its real merit.) If that is what the right wing — the so-called “yeshiva world” (which yeshiva? which yeshivot? certainly not all!) — wants, then that is the ground on which we must respond, namely, the symbolic value of our continued affiliation.

Hence, the constituency of the Union must decide on the question: shall we, by seceding from the SCA, publicly declare that American Orthodoxy is “going it alone”; or shall we, by affirming our continued membership, aver that we are part and parcel of the entire American Jewish community, the great majority of whom are not Orthodox? Are we in the community or out of it?

A decision to quit the SCA is, in effect, the first step in a kind of contemporary *Austrits* Orthodoxy in America. I think I can appreciate the point of the advocates of this policy, albeit that it is not always made sufficiently explicit. The assumption is that Orthodoxy in America has been gaining strength and vitality, and that the Orthodox Right has especially benefited from the "swing to the Right." The non-Orthodox Jewish Community is deteriorating and can, therefore, be written off for the long run. Hence it makes sense that the so-called "modern Orthodoxy" establishment — including, generally, such institutions and groups as the Orthodox Union, RCA, Yeshiva University, and the largest and most significant Orthodox congregations in this country — form an alliance with the Right. Hopefully, we can then survive and not be dragged down into perdition by the non-Orthodox community.

There is a certain compelling logic to this argument, if one is willing to grant the premises. But it is precisely these premises which are open to criticism. Whereas there is some cause for optimism as to recent developments in Orthodoxy, and for pessimism with regard to the total Jewish community, it is not at all that clear that we have two decisive and irreversible trends: upwards for Orthodoxy, downwards for other Jews.

True, we have benefited in recent years from new accretions of strength. But this has not been altogether the result of our own attractiveness, and is not even the harvest we hoped to reap from the Day School movement. We have not bothered to analyze the reasons for our new vigorousness. Is part of it, perhaps, the result of the new Jewish ethnicity and the general disillusionment of young people in the 1960's (and the residue of this movement into the 70's)? If it is, it is most certainly too shallow a foundation on which to build a long-term policy. For if this source dries up, and we shall have seceded from the community, we shall be left as an isolated and insignificant fringe group without power or influence!

We may also be rather one-sided in focusing on our new surge of strength — and ignoring certain ongoing weaknesses. To mention but a few: we suffer a constant attrition, even from those who attend yeshivot; we are not totally immune to the ravages of mixed marriages and "kook" groups; we have chronic financial problems that seem never to get solved, only grow older; the rhetoric of intra-Orthodox polemics grows hotter, and meaner and more raucous, and we usually succeed in creating a *chillul ha-shem* with our lack of mutual respect. Because of our unrestrained diatribes against each other, we usually fail to present our positions with dignity. And in how many communities throughout this continent are the Orthodox synagogues and schools the most numerous and the most powerful? One can go on and on.

While the diagnosis of the ills of the non-Orthodox majority unfortunately seems convincing, I am not prepared to subscribe to the gloomy prog-

nosis — at least not for the immediate future or shortly thereafter. I agree that in the long run American Jewry can not and will not survive without Torah. (The same holds true for the State of Israel.) But recent history should have taught us a lesson about the futility of easy prognostication. Casual optimism and casual pessimism are both unwarranted. Jewish history has, especially recently, taken so many unexpected twists and turns, that no general predictions can be made with any degree of certainty. Example: anti-Semitism. We are not expecting any significant increase in this phenomenon, but who can tell? Should the disease spread but be kept within limits, the Jewish community may have a longer lifespan than expected otherwise, and this without the benefit of a genuine religious commitment. (It is, of course, ironical and cruel, but these are the essential alternatives: survival because of commitment; survival because of anti-Semitism; extinction.)

There is also a moral point involved. Do we — does any one — have the right to write off some six million souls? If, indeed, we are confronted with the disappearance of the major part of American Jewry, does this not constitute a Holocaust — painless but terrible, mindless but mind-boggling? Can the House of Israel survive *two* holocausts in one century? And if this is what we honestly feel will happen, what are we doing to avoid it? What are we doing to save those who might otherwise be lost to us? Are we self-righteously going to emulate Noah by huddling in our little ark and let the rest of the Jewish world drown?

If the premises we mentioned were firmly established — if it were beyond reasonable doubt that Orthodoxy will flourish and all others wither away — I suppose one could insist that the self-interest of *world* Jewry requires that *some* Jews survive intact, and hence the inner alliance of both segments of Orthodoxy and the abandonment of the rest of American Jewry. I would still resist such harsh conclusions on an number of grounds. But given the uncertainty of the premises, any deliberate despair of the future for the main body of the Jewish community, and the resultant decision to cut ourselves off from them, is insensitive, callous — and self-defeating.

Hence, secession from SCA is a symbol of the splitting of Orthodoxy from the rest of the Jewish community. It is an act based on questionable assumptions and leading to dangerous conclusions.

I shall refrain from commenting on any of the other issues raised by the secessionists, save one. I wish to address myself to the argument that somehow we Orthodox Jews must show preference for totally irreligious Jews over Conservative and Reform Jews, and that while, therefore, it may be “kosher” for us to cooperate with secularist and nationalist Jews and belong to umbrella organizations with them, it is wrong to do so with non-Orthodox Jews who claim to express a Jewish religious, though non-Orthodox, point of view.

I can very well appreciate the psychological basis of this view. I do, however, challenge it on ideological grounds, because I think that it is an excellent strategy — for yesterday, not today.

I hold no brief, of course, for non-Orthodox religiosity. Judaism is for me a whole, and whoever wounds it draws blood from its heart. A truncated Judaism is both unwholesome and unholy. But this holds true not only for those who accept one part of Torah and reject another, but, *kal va-chomer*, for those who reject *all* of Torah and accept only the peoplehood of Israel. By what logic must we offer friendship to those who abandon *all* the *mitzvot* and deny it to those who ignore only *some* of them?

Halakhically, this distinction between secularist and non-Orthodox, in favor of the former, is even less supportable than by logic. Thus, for instance, the Rambam (*Hil. Teshuvah*, IV) offers a categorization of heretics, all of whom are equally denied *olam haba*. The categories are in descending order of severity. First are the *minnim*, those who deny some fundamental of the Jewish concept of God. Then come the *apikorsim*, three types who deny the communication between God and man. Thirds is the *kofrim ba-torah*, those who reject some element of the Jewish faith concerning Torah, such as its divine origin. A bit of contemplation will show that most (though not all) secularist agnostics will fit into the first category, while most (though not all) Conservative and Reform rabbis will fit into the second and, even more, third groups. The Rambam, I submit, would have been aghast at the suggestion that the *minnim* are more worthy of our cooperation and friendship than the *kofrim ba-torah*. Incidentally, one other category included by the Rambam in this rogues' gallery is *baalei lashon hara*. Consistency would require the secessionists to withdraw from many an Orthodox organization, as well as from the SCA . . .

Even were I to grant the legitimacy of assigning a special place of disfavor those who have misappropriated the term "Judaism," I would not agree that it follows therefrom that we must leave the SCA. It is simply not true that secularist Jews have voluntarily forfeited their rights to the term "Judaism." For them, work on behalf of UJA or B'nai B'rith or the ZOA is in effect a form of "Judaism." They feel as entitled to the honorific term as we do; in fact, they reverse the procedure: Judaism is, for them, a voluntary commitment to Jewish identity and continuity, in the national or ethnic sense, and Jewish "ritual observance" is therefore recognized as only one way of effecting this perpetuation of the people. They, in other words, are offering *us* recognition, not the other way around. (It is possible that we have become trapped by mistranslation. In English we tend to differentiate between Judaism and Jewishness, but nationalists and secularists, in Yiddish, have always tended to refer to themselves as followers of *weltliche Yiddishkeit*.)

The desire to accentuate the differences between ourselves and the non-

Orthodox, by estranging them even more than outright atheists, made a great deal more sense when most people were essentially religious but might have been misled by the heterodox groups. Today our big problem is, unfortunately, far more fundamental.

The great battle of our generation within the Jewish community is not between those who are loyal to the fullness of Torah and those who wish to reject the *mechitzah* or the second days *yom tov* or institute a new *ketubah* or deny the halakhic definition of Jewish identity (I purposely choose subjects on which I have written against the "reforms"), much as these changes are hateful. The confrontation is and will be between those who affirm the existence of a Transcendent One to Whom man owes his existence and from Whom the people of Israel derives its meaning, and those who treat man as a cosmic accident and Israel as just another people whose only importance is that we happen to belong to it. The *min* is a greater danger than the *kofer ba-torah*, even if the innocent bystander will be less prone to mistake our position for that of the former than that of the latter. Our public policy must follow the order of the Shema: first we must assure the *kabbalat ole malkhut shamayim*, then we can go on to *kabbalat ha-mitzvot*.

The challenges which confront the Jewish people today are, in the order of severity: our continued existence as a people; our existence as the people of God; our loyalty to the full Torah and Torah tradition. The military threat against the State of Israel and the great danger of assimilation in the Diaspora, make it imperative that we cooperate with all Jews who share this one commitment: the survival of Israel as both people and state. Next, our efforts must be directed at continuing our historically unique role as *am ha-shem* and opposing the shallow myth of Israel as "a nation like all other nations." Finally, we must strive mightily for the halakhic integrity of Judaism. (This latter point means, for me, that I cannot cooperate in purely halakhic matters with those who reject its authority. That is why I have refrained from joining any mixed rabbinical boards. Rabbis have only one business and that is Torah. Everything else is their avocation, which they pursue as ordinary Jews, not as rabbis.)

The tendency to emphasize the differences between ourselves and those ideologically closest to us should not commend itself to us merely because it is satisfying psychologically. The idea leads to patent absurdities. I do not refer only to a theoretical *reductio ad absurdum*, but to events which occurred within recent memory. When the late Rabbi Levin of Moscow visited this country, several years ago, he came under the auspices of the American Council of Judaism, and was shepherded through his official functions by a leader of — the Neturei Karta! The Neturei Karta would certainly not have cooperated with the Orthodox Union — but the detestable American Council for Judaism was kosher for them. Hate thy neighbor and love thy enemy! The same syndrome is evident when distinguished rabbis, who are critical of

the Union because of its SCA policy, will not even deign to address our conventions. Driven to the final conclusion by the irresistible logic of total consistency, we must all of us henceforth cease talking to each other and, instead, rush to embrace those with whom we have least in common. This is, ultimately, a formula for communal disaster.

Having dwelt on these two issues, I shall not elaborate on any of the other matters that have been reviewed time and again in the past. My conclusion in 1974 is the same as it was in 1969 — retention by the Orthodox Union of its membership in the SCA.

However, if we should so decide, I hope it will be a membership of a different nature and quality, namely, an affirmative and creative participation, using the SCA as an instrument in the furtherance of our ends in enhancing the quality of Jewish life in this country. I pleaded for this five years ago and I do so today again. It is unbecoming for an organization such as ours to accept membership simply in a “watch-dog” capacity. We were created for a destiny greater than that of a communal canine role. Our association must no longer be sterile and defensive, but productive and innovative. To do this will require of us active participation by both lay *and* professional staff.