

January 28, 2004

Rabbi Norman Lamm
Chancellor
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Yeshiva University
500 West 185th Street
New York, NY 10033-3201

Dear Rabbi Lamm:

I hope this letter finds you well.

Upon my return this week from a brief visit to Eretz Yisroel, I found several clippings in my in-box (from the *New York Times* and the Anglo-Jewish weeklies) relating to last week's visit to the beis medrash of Yeshiva University by several prominent Catholic priests. I also heard from one of our constituents that you were on Zev Brenner's radio program on Motzoei Shabbos to discuss this matter; and that there was some talk between the two of you about how this interaction with Catholic religious leaders was of a kind with the types of interactions that Rabbi Moshe Sherer, z'l had (and Agudath Israel of America still has today) with the Catholic Church.

Not having heard the radio program, and not being familiar with the background of last week's visit beyond what I read in the clippings, perhaps there are some additional details that would help me understand this better. However, having had the honor of serving at Rabbi Sherer's right hand for the last fourteen years of his life, and having the responsibility today on behalf of our organization to work with the Catholic leadership on a variety of issues, I must respectfully tell you that last week's event strikes me as a giant step removed from what Agudath Israel of America has been doing with the Catholics over the years.

Yes, we do work with the Catholic Church behind the scenes on matters of mutual concern, and enjoy good professional (and on occasion even personal) relationships with some of their leaders. However, to the best of my knowledge, we have never participated in a public event of the nature that occurred last week at Yeshiva University. Indeed, I recall instances when Rabbi Sherer specifically declined invitations from Cardinal O'Connor to join together publicly, notwithstanding the worthiness of the cause to which the invitation was attached. As a general rule, such public undertakings would be inconsistent with the guidelines we have received from our Gedolei Torah on this sensitive issue. And, while I don't believe the specific question was ever asked, I imagine that inviting a delegation of

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priests in full religious regalia into a yeshiva beis medrash – a veritable “*tzelem b’heichal*” – as part of a formal interfaith program, and then to have the priests (including a meshumad who prides himself on his knowledge of Yiddish and Yiddishkeit) “talk in learning” to the yeshiva talmidim, would be deemed inappropriate by Agudath Israel of America’s rabbinic leaders (if not by Torah authorities outside of Agudath Israel’s camp as well).

Whether or not the “visitation” technically violated the longstanding ban on “interreligious dialogue” is not something I am qualified to judge. But whatever the *psak* on that might be, and whatever other factors should have gone into the equation, the *she’eila* is hardly small-minded.

But I digress. My main purpose in this letter is simply to set the record straight about Rabbi Sherer’s and Agudath Israel of America’s policy regarding working with other faith groups like the Catholics. (I take the liberty of enclosing an article I wrote a few years ago that amplifies on this subject.) I’m not sure how you might rectify the misimpression you may have conveyed on the Brenner program, but perhaps there are steps you can take. At a minimum, I trust that in the future you will not cite Agudath Israel of America’s example as a model for last week’s spectacle.

Parenthetically, I found it both interesting and frightening to see the *Forward* article two weeks ago on the “controversial” *shtikel Torah* by [REDACTED] in *Beit Yitzhak*. I continue to be concerned, as I wrote in one of my letters to J.J. Goldberg (on which I copied you), that once we start down the path of evaluating Torah scholarship by the sensitivities of modern day society, we are well on our way toward a regime of censorship that could well harm the essential integrity of Torah. As I see it, this is a major challenge that intelligent people from all corners of the Torah world need to face. I would be interested in your thoughts on this.

Sincerely,

Chaim Dovid Zwiebel

CDZ:ld
Encl.

cc: Mr. Zev Brenner