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# Yeshiva University / Office of the President



January 10, 1989

Lord Immanuel Jakobovits, Chief Rabbi  
Office of the Chief Rabbi  
Adler House, Tavistock Square  
London, WC1H 9HN ENGLAND.

Dear Immanuel:

Many thanks for your kind words and, especially, for sending me a copy of the talk you gave at the Orthodox Union a couple of days before I gave mine.

I read your talk carefully--I always peruse your material with the greatest attention!--and my efforts were amply rewarded. It is an excellent summary of the state of Orthodoxy in the world, and deserves wide distribution both here and abroad. I was especially impressed by your cogent distinction between power and influence. It is emet la-amitah.

However, that does not mean that I agree with everything you say. I commented to you in my last note that I was not completely happy with the report in the press about your statements concerning Centrist Orthodoxy. Now that you were kind enough to let me see the original text, I am even more troubled.

The emphasis on Orthodox Centrism is not intended to be adversarial, building on hostility to the Right. It is based, partly, on the simple human need for an identity. The so-called "Yeshiva world" and the Hasidic world have placed us off-limits. We are shunned by them. I am prepared to give you chapter and verse of humiliations that we have suffered over the past years that are illustrative of the animosity of the Right towards everything that Yeshiva University stands for, but I hesitate to do so lest you quite naturally interpret whatever communal decisions I make as mere reactions to personal offense. But anyway, I shall overcome my hesitation and risk mentioning only a few of them, in the hope that you will not misinterpret my communal policies as mere reactions to petty grievances.

The story begins sixty or seventy years ago when Dr. Revel first became President of Yeshiva. Try as he would, and despite some initial successes, we were never wholly acceptable to the



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"Yeshiva world" of his generation. A petty illustration: when Yeshiva moved from the lower East Side to its present location, it was attacked for symbolically abandoning true Orthodoxy for the allure of the heterodoxy of the nouveaux-riches...

Sometimes, the animosity to Yeshiva invaded the domain of life and death. Indeed, I have a letter from the late, sainted Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman who was asked by two young men, just as hostilities were breaking out in Europe on the eve of the Holocaust, whether they might accept visas from our Yeshiva. The response they received was that to attend "Revel's Yeshiva" was destructive of the Jewish soul, and the destruction of the body is no worse than the destruction of the soul. Hence, they remained in Europe...

In my own High School days at Torah Vodaath, every effort was made to brainwash me and my schoolmates into believing that Yeshiva was the natural bridge to Conservatism and Reform, that it was "pasul/treif," and that transferring to Yeshiva was tantamount to apostasy--a kind of dry baptism.

When I became President of Yeshiva thirteen years ago, leaders of all kinds of Jewish institutions and schools wrote to congratulate me. Not one of the heads of yeshivot wrote to or called me. Shortly thereafter, I invited several Roshei Yeshivah of other yeshivot to come and visit, give a sheur, etc. I never received an invitation in return--and not one of them responded positively to my invitations.

At a hesped for one of our own Ramim, one of the leading lights of one of the Brooklyn yeshivot spoke and, in the presence of the entire assembly including Rabbi Soloveitchik and myself, bemoaned the fact that the niftar had to teach in our yeshiva, not in a "real yeshiva."

At both weddings and hespedim that I have attended, all other Ramim, even of diminutive and insignificant yeshivot that do not qualify to be called chadarim, are routinely introduced with royal flourishes, identifying the realm over which they reign. Our Ramim are generally introduced as if they were floating in space --ungeographically--with no reference to where they teach or otherwise serve.

Last March, I spoke at The Fifth Avenue Synagogue, and in The New York Times report (which was not entirely accurate, or at least



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lent itself to misinterpretation), I said two things that apparently enraged the Right--that we should not press the "Who is a Jew" issue before the Knesset, and that the Haredim should not be the only ones to set the agenda in Jewish life. I am sure that you are aware of the broadside against me by Professor Aaron Twersky and my subsequent correspondence with him on the pages of The Jewish Observer. Let me give you a sense of the downright meanness that not only I personally but the Yeshiva as a whole faces. When I submitted the article and wrote, as a matter of courtesy, to the editor that I am pleased to enclose this answer to Professor Twersky "in response to your invitation," I received a short note from the editor saying that he wishes to clarify that he did not invite me to respond, but merely was willing to accept my article if it was submitted. I hope you get the implication: Someone outside the sacred circle of Agudah can never be "invited" to appear on holy ground, but at most a concession may be made and a request by the heathen to enter the sanctuary may sometimes be honored, even at the risk of consequent contamination.

Because of these grave sins, the Rosh Yeshiva of Telshe last Passover, in an address at the Young Israel, spent twenty minutes expatiating on the prohibition of lashon ha-ra, and then proceeded to illustrate what is meant by lashon ha-ra in a vulgar, tasteless, undignified, and obscene attack upon me in which no arguments were mentioned, and name-calling was the sole form of entertaining his audience.

Another item, even more personal, that I hesitate to commit to writing even in a confidential communication: When my son Josh and my daughter-in-law Rivkie decided four years ago to adopt a little boy, we had the berit and then decided to arrange for the tevillah with the same Beit Din in Washington Heights. The then rabbi of the kehillah refused to allow us to use his mikvah...

Now, my dear Immanuel, I am a big boy and I have learned from my distinguished colleague and former neighbor, the truly noble lord who serves as the Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue of Great Britain, that if you take a stand and have independent opinions and ideas, you must expect to be criticized and must be prepared for adverse reactions. I grant all that, and I hail you as my master in teaching me how to do so. But again, it is not personal hurt that motivates me, as much as the feeling that we are being shunned, discounted, deprecated. Yeshiva University,



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what it stands for (Torah Umada, Centrist Orthodoxy), and its aspirations are considered by the Right outside the pale of Orthodoxy. Hence, are we creating a "movement," or has the Right made of us a movement not only because it has consistently and persistently refused to recognize our existence as a legitimate voice of Torah Judaism, but because it has unfailingly acknowledged us as a group when it comes to denunciation and functional excommunication?

I am not "abandoning them," to use the verb you use in your address. On the contrary, I have always tried to resist the temptation of the sociological imperative that you lash out most strongly against those closest to you on the ideological spectrum. No matter what some of the nastier people on the Right say or feel, we are part of one continuum of yirei Ha-Shem and Benei Torah, and we shall steadfastly refuse to engage in the kind of cannibalism which they have used against us. But we most certainly will not fold up our tents and escape like thieves in the night. If our convictions are sincere, if this is what we believe Yiddishkeit is all about, then the dignity of those convictions demands that we state our position fearlessly and propagate it vigorously. If the affirmation of our collective existence constitutes "divisiveness," then we are divisive. But I do not agree that to exist and to delight in your own existence is an inexcusable offense against others. We have the same right to an identity as does HaBaD, the Agudah, the Hirschians, or any other expression of Orthodoxy--no more, no less.

And while I admire the Right for the reinvigoration of Jewish life in America, I beg you to remember that a great deal of the credit for starting the Day School movement in this country belongs to Yeshiva alumni--both at the helm of Torah Umesorah (such as Joe Kaminetzky) and the soldiers out in the field who helped build these various schools.

Moreover, I happily report to you that our own community is responding by voting with its feet. By this I mean, that our undergraduate enrollment--both at Yeshiva and Stern--broke all records this past September and shows every promise, p.G., of breaking even that record this coming September.

I agree with you that we must collaborate with the Right in mutual understanding, but must emphasize the dictionary meaning



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of "mutual." Moreover, I shall make every effort not to have to rely solely upon the Right "to build and staff our schools," but to create our own cadres of teachers and Ramim who will not undermine what we stand for and who espouse what may be somewhat different from that which the Right champions.

Perhaps, my dear Immanuel, I have gone on a bit too far--perhaps over the deep end--in replying to the comments which you were kind enough to let me see. But these remarks are not meant for anyone else's eyes but your own. As a colleague and a very dear friend of many years standing, I feel it important to let you know how I feel about issues on which, uncharacteristically, we happen to disagree. I confess that I am writing as well in the hope that you will read my ideas with the same openness and care that I have always given to yours, and that perhaps I can convince you that my recent moods and statements are not meant as an expression of hostility to the Right as much as despair of being able to work with them consistently and hope that genuine leadership and identity-building at this time will ultimately prove creative and constructive for all of Torah Judaism.

Now, as long as I am overwriting, let me complete the job by addressing another argument, which you have made elsewhere as well, that the combination of demographical plenitude and subservience to authority bode well for the future of the Yeshiva-Hasidic group; that this gives them a sense of self confidence lacking in our camp; that they will in any event survive; and that therefore it is best for us to go along with them.

Agreed, there is a strong possibility that they will triumph. But, ba-hadei kavshei de'Rahamana lamah lakh! More than one group that lies obscure in the dust-bin of history still is covered with the thick, non-porous membrane of self-gratulatory triumphalism. Who is to say which of us will "make it?" We are promised only that the seed of Abraham will survive in the land given to him, there to worship the Holy One and to abide by His Torah; even the Torah will suffer oblivion for long periods of time--atidah Torah she'tishtakah mi'Yisrael. We are told nothing of their ideology, orientation, clothing, language.

I often remind myself that the past has not always proved a secure guide to the future. During the days of the Prophets,



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Jews loyal to God and His Torah were a despised minority. Elijah thought he was the last of a dying breed. Yet Isaiah recognized in the loyalists Israel's "saving remnant." (Ravidowicz has a marvelous essay called, "Israel: The Ever Dying People," about the premature auto-obituaries proclaimed by the greatest of Jews throughout the generations.)

What I most object to in the triumphalist thesis is the notion that the triumph proves the underlying truth of the victor. This is good Christian doctrine which I, as both a Jew and a rational ~~time serves as the touchstone (other than the arrival of the~~ human being, cannot accept. I refuse to capitalize "History" and thus imply that I attribute to it a magical power to sift out truth from falsehood, endowing truth with survivability and decreeing historical death to the bearers of false doctrines. If I am wrong, and history is a clue to truth, then what point in time serves as the touchstone (other than the arrival of the Messiah)? Take any 100-year segment and you will find annoyingly unpredictable and conflicting phenomena emerging. For instance: Are we to say that History has established as Truth, let us say, the worship of Baal in the 7th Century BCE, because it then had vanquished its foes in the civilized world, only to condemn it as false in the 7th Century CE, when monotheism was in the ascendancy? Does "truth" have any meaning after such an exercise?

A final note on this question of the future: I suggest that in our attempts to discern who will or will not ultimately inherit the earth, we consider carefully the economic element. Victory does not necessarily belong to the rich. But it is also not guaranteed to a community that spurns careers, that pushes all--the incompetent majority along with the elite--into decades-long kollelim, and which regards working for a living as a source of embarrassment. Ten Reichmann families will not be able to bail out the thousands of Meah Shearim-Geulah and Bnei Brak families raised on the ideology of the dole!

Of course, I am tilting against windmills, because you certainly need no instruction on this matter. But then your counsel that we keep our peace in the presence of the Right because they are the ones who are going to survive, implies an unconscious assent to the triumphalist thesis. And that, I submit, needs reflection and correction.

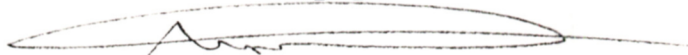


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Forgive me for my verbosity. It is only because I so value your opinions, and because I feel so comfortable in "schmoozing" with you, even in writing, that I have gone on at such length. I needed the catharsis!

Mindy joins me in best regards to Amelie.

Cordially yours,



NORMAN LAMM  
President

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