

BEDFORD PARK BOULEVARD WEST
BRONX, NEW YORK 10468

MEMORANDUM ON SYNAGOGUE COUNCIL

As much as many of us would like it to go away, the problem of Union membership in the Synagogue Council is still with us. The reason for this is plain: the issue goes to the heart of Orthodox unity and development in this country; it is not an irrelevant polemic that the foes of SCA continue to wage. In this memorandum I would like to develop the view that continued membership in SCA is inimical to the welfare of the UOJCA and the Orthodox Community and that our leadership must face up to this question, at the convention or otherwise, in a responsible and courageous fashion.

1. SCA was formed in the 1920's at a time when Orthodox Jewry in this country was weak. Indisputably, if the question today was whether to join, our response would be negative, for the situation is much improved over what it was forty years ago. Yet, we are being told to confront the challenges of the latter third of this century in terms of an enervated Orthodoxy of more than a generation ago. We reject this attitude in other areas, such as Chinuch, and we ought to do the same here.

2. From its inception until now the SCA has not contributed in any way to the observance of Halacha or to the general welfare of the Torah world. The proponents of continued membership do not controvert this, nor do they advance any positive reasons for the maintenance of a status quo which is contrary to the changing situation of Orthodox Jewry. The virtues of belonging to SCA are negative, amounting, in fact, to straw men easily knocked down, and to fears that are born out of a lack of confidence in Orthodox vitality.

3. But the case against SCA does not rest on the mere inefficacy of this antiquarian umbrella. The organization, even with the Orthodox veto, has acted contrary to our interests, as in the quickly forgotten Boston conference of last year. Indeed whenever



the SCA decides to do something more than issue pro forma statements on public matters it is apt to act counter to our conception of its purpose. Some explain this in terms of a conspiracy: SCA is dominated by those hostile to Torah and consequently its actions manifest this basic attitude. But the reason is much simpler. The SCA is for practical reasons stopped from playing a meaningful role save where its posture is religious or theological.

We of the Orthodox community distinguish between action and dialogue, interfaith and intrafaith, that which is theological in orientation and that which is social action in nature. In theory the distinction is tenable. Yet, I respectfully submit that the very brilliance of the explication of the theory by Rav Solevetchik, Shlita and Rabbi Lamm has obscured a significant point. We of the Orthodox community accept the distinction; the Conservative and Reform do not. Four of the six constituent agencies of SCA - and generally SCA as a body - believe that Jewish positions on public issues are so derived from the spiritual core of Judaism as to blur any division between theology and public policy.

Moreover, the SCA is a small organization, rather impoverished by secular Jewish standards. On public matters it cannot compete with the AJC's, Bnai Brith, and so on and hence it limits itself to public statements. Its itch for action is often oriented towards conferences; inevitably the subject is religion and not public policy.

4. Withdrawal from the SCA will not in any way hamper communication with the non-Orthodox in areas where we have found interaction permissible and desirable. We are active in NCRAC together with the other Synagogue bodies. The NCRAC and SCA comprise the Joint Action Committee, so that there will be opportunity to deal with Rabbinical groups also. Interestingly, the impotence of SCA as a body on public matters is relevantly demonstrated by the fact that the JAC is really dominated by the NCRAC.

5. The evils of the SCA and membership in SCA are real, not phantoms. They have prompted the opposition to SCA which is so pronounced in much of the Orthodox community. This opposition is known to all of us and need not be repeated here. In the past year one more voice was added to this camp when Rav Nissim, Shlita, at our dinner, sharply rejected SCA-type

acceptance of Reform and Conservative. His statement was especially noteworthy because he had carefully avoided discussion of numerous matters and had spoken almost exclusively of the need for Orthodox aliyah. It is hard to justify ^{his} need his admonition.

6. Arguendo, I will accept two propositions that I believe are far less clear than some believe them to be. The first is that RCA's Halachic Committee has directly sanctioned SCA membership. The second is that the UOJCA which claims and desires to represent the totality of the Orthodox community is bound to accept RCA Halachic judgments.

In any case, an RCA Halachic ruling on SCA could bind UOJCA only if it was against membership; Halachic acceptance of membership cannot require it.

7. The deleterious effect of SCA membership on intra-Orthodox unity is known to all of us; it is not a matter of idle speculation. Even tentative, limited, and ad hoc arrangements for joint Orthodox action are inhibited because of the unwillingness of much of the Orthodox community to accept SCA membership. Surely, here is an issue of the gravest concern for all who care about our ability to cope with the problems posed by American life; for the SCA is not only a barrier to organizational cooperation; it also blocks functional cooperation within the Torah world and because of this the quality of Jewish life itself suffers. It is hard to understand how responsible leadership continues to ignore the ramifications of SCA membership on our ability to work cooperatively with others; it is equally hard to account for the unwillingness to take a bold step which could well lead to a breakthrough in the desired re-structuring of American Orthodoxy.

8. But it is maintained that SCA membership, whatever its effect on intra-Orthodox affairs, affords Orthodoxy with an opportunity to communicate with the masses of Reform and Conservative, if not totally alienated, Jews. Were this claim even partially valid opponents of SCA would be hard put to justify their apparent intransigence. However, experience teaches that the claim is wholly without foundation. The SCA has not in a single instance facilitated interaction with the non-Orthodox rank and file. What it has done is to interpose an organizational barrier to such desirable communication; we ought not to mistake occasional

meetings with a handful of Reform and Conservative leaders for a meaningful dealings with millions of non-Orthodox Jews. So long as we rationalize SCA membership in these unrealistic terms we are likely to eschew development of a meaningful program for communicating our values to others.

9. Other defenses of SCA membership are more transparent, still. Given the current Orthodox disarray, UOJCA withdrawal while RCA stays could not create an embarrassment for us. But if RCA remains it makes no sense to argue that our leaving will deprive Orthodoxy of its SCA veto. The SCA proponents cannot have it both ways.

10. Most absurd is the contention that SCA withdrawal will hurt primarily in the New York City area, either through a "rump" group or otherwise. We should take sensible notice of the fact that in New York City- more than anywhere else- there is Orthodox hostility to SCA, so much so that it is here that the UOJCA is weakest. Those of us who follow New York Orthodox developments must appreciate the strength of anti-SCA groups. Witness the Schechita issue, despite RCA! Most of the 1,000 Orthodox Congregations in the City are against SCA. The only realistic conclusion about possible consequences of SCA withdrawal is that in New York it would be salutary to UOJCA.

11. The very iffiness of dire predictions concerning UOJCA finances should withdrawal come, hints at the weakness of such an argument based on future financial calculations for programs at best in the womb of time.

12. Reluctantly, I point to one resource depletion flowing directly from continuation in SCA: the inability to attract to UOJCA ranks workers and supporters from Orthodox sectors critical of membership. My knowledge here is first-hand, and I hope not to be taken lightly.

13. Without developing the point fully here, I propose that withdrawal be accompanied with announcement of a plan to penetrate and participate in functional bodies in which the voice of Orthodoxy has not been sufficiently heard. I refer to such groups as the New York Federation, the Council of Federation and Welfare Funds, AAJE, Hillel, JWB, and so on. Such

a step would have obvious public relations value, but this is not the reason I make it. I firmly believe in the need for vigorous, militant Orthodox involvement in these areas; it is here that we must commit our growing pool of young talent; and it must ^{might} be advisable eventually to get a coordinator for such activity. Most significantly, we must create effective Orthodox communication with the non-Orthodox in place of the bogus arrangement provided by SCA.

I respectfully request that the issues presented here get full attention by our organization and not be swept under the rug because we are afraid to face up to them or because we conveniently fall prey to the phantom reasons that so regularly abort proper discussion of this most vital subject.

Marvin Schick
October 31, 1968

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10/31/68