

MEMORANDUM

TO: Mr. Marvin Herskowitz, Chairman, Study Panel

FROM: Rabbi Norman Lamm

DATE: July 29, 1969

I

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 consequence. 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 only as a symbol, but unimportant in itself.

From everything I have heard about the Synagogue Council of America (SCA), it has a limited scope of activity (how much can an "address" accomplish?). 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, 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.

II

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 to set down even these few comments for your consideration.

The Study Panel which deliberated on these matters-- 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, Mr. Chairman, that we engaged in an exercise in futility.

III

It is for this reason that I refrain from imposing on you a complete restatement of my views. I do, however, wish to address a few remarks to one principle that has informed the attitude of the secessionists, and that was clearly expressed by Rabbi Pelcowitz in his memorandum. That is, 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, and I think that it is an excellent strategy--for yesterday.

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. Third is the kofrim ba-torah, those who reject some element of 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 granting a special place of disfavor for 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 a 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 Judentum or 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 fundamentally 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 fulness of Torah and those who wish to reject the mechitzah or the second days yom tov or institute a new ketubah (I purposely choose subjects on which I have written polemically against the "reforms"),

much as these changes are hateful; but 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 (I am thinking more of the USSR than of the Arabs) 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 the 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 oneself and those ideologically closest to him must not be accepted 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 Rabbi Levin of Moscow visited this country last year, 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 is 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.

IV Having dwelt on one substantive issue, I shall refrain from elaborating on any of the other matters that have been reviewed time and again in the past. My conclusion is the same as it was-- 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. 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 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.

V

All this having been said, I recognize nevertheless the serious reservations and apprehensions of other members of the Study Panel. I therefore associate myself with the proposal of Mr. Lawrence Kobrin, provided that I shall have the opportunity to consider the list of items to be inserted by Rabbi Pelcowitz in paragraph 1-2 of the Kobrin resolution.

I regret, Mr. Chairman, that my reaction has tended to be negative and my assessment of the Panel's work rather discouraging. But this honestly reflects my feeling of futility at the constant rehash of an issue undeserving of all this attention and discord.

VI

Accordingly, may I ask to be relieved of any further membership on this Panel in the event it is commissioned to continue its deliberations beyond its present tenure.