

Memorandum

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION

CLIFTON AVENUE • CINCINNATI, OHIO 45220 • PHONE 221-1875

DATE February 7, 1984

TO Faculty Members

FROM M. Tsevat

Re: Comments on Dr. R. L. Katz's "Informal [Open] Memo to President Gottschalk" of December 21, 1983

(1) These written comments are in lieu of oral comments which were scheduled to be made at the Faculty meeting of January 18, 1984. Extended antecedent reports and discussions at that meeting prevented me from presenting the comments as scheduled. For this text I am using extensive but discontinuous notes of the planned oral delivery and am supplying the missing details and connections without, however, attempting to integrate the whole into a stylistically satisfying version. My apologies for the resulting imperfection.

(2) The following comments focus on the principle of Dr. Katz's memo; they are expanded by rather brief discussions of two or three ancillary issues.

(3) The person of Dr. J. A. Sanders or anyone else will not be considered and will play no role in the following, except where and to the extent that it is explicitly introduced. I will also at times, and naturally, mention Dr. Katz, the editor of the Informal Memo, which occasions the following remark. Dr. Katz was kind enough to stand in for several unnamed faculty who are designated as "senior." The designation is disconcerting. There is a difference between tenured and untenured members of the faculty, but it is almost exclusively one of employment and contractuality. There is no difference between members as regards voting at meetings and, consequently, as regards the relative weight of their views. The introduction of the difference between senior and junior members (there would be no chiefs if there were no Indians) is regrettable, but some may find comfort in the verse: bišišim xokma? w'orek yamim tvuna?

During the five years that I lived in Nazi Germany as a young adult, I had unending streams of thought about the present and the future of myself, my family, my people, the world. But one thought never occurred to me: that one day I would be involved in a Jewish enterprise that is, or advocates the philosophy and the policy to be, christenrein. Nor did I anticipate such involvement after Hitler had disappeared. That I now find myself confronted with a reality which had been and was until a month ago beyond even the most tortuous imagination is the worst of experiences, personal or institutional, that I have had during my long years of service at the Hebrew Union College.

"The association between the Rabbinic School and our Graduate School...is very close," Dr. Katz writes. This statement, he implies, entitles him to tell the Graduate School in the name of the Rabbinical School how to conduct its affairs. Yet in the phrase and concept of closeness of the two schools, a point to which I shall return, there is nothing that disqualifies a non-Jew from holding the office of the dean of the Graduate School, just as the word and concept of university does not disqualify a nonscientist from becoming the president of Columbia University, let alone of an institution merely cove to Columbia University. That is to say, much as you may analyze the concept, you won't find the requirement of a Jewish dean for the Graduate School in it unless you have first put it in explicitly or implicitly so that you can later take it out and produce it when you need it for your argument. And this is what happened here. By sleight of hand, the nature, the organization, and the work of the Graduate School are thus preordained without the professors who do much of their work there being asked whether they agree, specifically, whether they agree to block the appointment of a Christian dean. (More on the blockage later).

The Graduate School is an academic institution for the promotion of objective, pure, and often basic science. To exclude persons from research, teaching, or administration irrespective of their scientific or academic qualifications or standards and only because they are members of this or that group is as inimical to science as is to exclude areas, materials, aims or methods of research irrespective of their scientific suitability and standards. Science can be harmed on its human side just as on its material side--by misemploying, obstructing or debarring its practitioners as by misusing methods or excluding goals because they are socially undesirable. This follows from theoretical reflection and is confirmed by an inquiry into history throughout the ages. Since the professors connected with the Informal Memo, intelligent and educated men, know this well, the diminution of science at the Graduate School is the price they are ready to pay in order to make their philosophy prevail.

It bears special note that these general remarks on science hold true for the Wissenschaft des Judentums no less than for any other science. Its objectivity and the purity of its truth -- as that of any truth -- prevent me as a teacher from shading things with one color for the graduates and another for the rabbinics. Normally there is, at any one moment of my understanding of a text, only one truth as far as its content, form, and intention are concerned. Sometimes I cannot decide between two or, rarely, more understandings, perceptions of truth, but this is due to my shortcoming or the condition of the text, but never because there are different truths for different people or different circumstances. The Talmud says: mišerabu talmidim...šelo šimšū kol corkam... ne'aset hatora kište torot (Sanhedrin 86b, slightly abbreviated). It would be our bane to have two torot. That I must be a Jew, according to the Informal Memo, to teach or administer at the Graduate School (failure in which of the two functions is more serious?), may be, in the eyes of some people, both an obligation and an honor and privilege; in my eyes it is a dishonor, it is disgraceful as all such conditions are. R. Yose is to the point: Hatqen 'acmak lilmud tora še'enah yruša lak (Avot 2:12).

All this is not to say that there is no difference between teaching graduate students and rabbinic students. When I teach rabbinic students Bible, for instance, I give more than pure science (to the extent that time permits): divre xazal, a sprinkling of medieval exegesis, šivat ciyon, Israel, among other ideas and facts -- in a word, the Jewish experience. For it we have the Rabbinic School, and its transmission is part of the education of a rabbi. Secure in their knowledge, and rightly so, that nobody would ever consider to hurt the Rabbinic School for any reason whatsoever, some members of the faculty believe they can with impunity emasculate science, even if they harm the Graduate School in the process.

At one group meeting with Dr. Sanders where Dr. Spicehandler and I were present, the attendants were asked whether they would object to Dr. Sanders being the dean of the Graduate School because he is Christian. Dr. Spicehandler said that he could not give a certain answer, that his mind was divided. This was not just a polite formulation for the sake of the guest. When I asked him about it in private a few days later, he reiterated his position: "50-50." But at the meeting he continued emphatically that once Dr. Sanders had become dean, there would not be the slightest objection or opposition to him. I do not know whether Dr. Spicehandler made this statement for himself or whether he assumed it for the whole faculty, whatever their original preferences.

In vain do I look for a similar statement in the Informal Memo, and yet it would have been of utmost importance for the health and well-being of the faculty. In most matters of faculty business, individuals may continue to oppose decisions of the faculty and, indeed, the College. Their opposition won't matter much, at least not at first. That is not so where the decision is about persons. A handful of members of the faculty can undo such a decision made by the majority. I have it on good authority that the likely plan to proceed with offering the office to Dr. Sanders could not be implemented because "they will kill him." I heard a similar reason, again on good authority, which was: "It will split the faculty." This means that the mutual trust of the faculty and practical democracy within it have received a dreadful blow.

It is not difficult to see why this is so. The faculty makes great efforts, successfully in almost all cases, to hold affirming and opposing views about persons in strict confidence, that it must never be known that I marked John Doe's evaluation sheet unfavorably or that, in committee, I expressed reservations about his promotion or, conversely, that I favored his promotion but was outvoted. We all bend every effort that nothing of our subsequent behavior will reveal what we thought or did at the time of decision. This has been the basic rule of the game, but it is undone now. From now on, there is no use continuing the game. Those who break the rule that, where persons are concerned, nothing of one's subsequent behavior must reveal his previous action or preference always win. Three or five men decide that a person is or will be non grata, and the administration and faculty are helpless. When this happens, neither faculty nor democracy is left except in a formal sense. Dr. Spicehandler did the right and decent thing.

Lastly a comment on the relation between the Rabbinic and Graduate Schools. Those at whose initiative Dr. Sanders came here in December acted as they did because they as well as others considered him a potential addition of strength to the Hebrew Union College in general and the Graduate School in particular. Whether, in the event, he would have been is a matter of opinion, but the least that can be said is that his promoters know him better than his disparagers and that they probably know better the needs of the Graduate School.

No less than others do I regret that we have so few Jewish students in the Graduate School. The reasons, however, are clear. Few Jews consider the academic study of Judaism a preparation for a likely professional career, particularly in the present decade after university positions in Judaic studies were occupied in the sixties and seventies, mostly by young scholars, and will not become vacant for one generation. Another reason: the Hebrew Union College has no feeder system for Jewish students, it has no farms of Jewish players. A third reason: some Jews gravitate towards certain ivy-league schools.

Reasons one and two do not apply to potential Christian students. There is a fair number of divinity schools that hold out prospects of professorships which open up at the sociologically normal rotation of life cycles. Also, we do have a feeder situation, if not system, in seminaries represented by our graduates and their colleagues and deans. It has become evident in recent years that the situation works to our advantage.

With these observations I have touched upon the importance of the placement of our graduates for the future of the Graduate School. If nothing else, and the formulation is unrealistically minimalistic for the sake of the argument, Dr. Sanders would have been very effective, so I believe, in placing our graduates and would thus have rendered an invaluable service to the College. (This, too, is a minimalistic expression for the sake of the argument. We want our graduates to be placed, and placed well, first and foremost in their own interest.)

The preceding paragraphs describe sociological circumstances that we cannot change, but the circumstances greatly influence the composition of the Graduate student body. They give us Christian students when the issue is not Christian students or Jewish students, but Christian students or almost no students.

The paramount question is: Does the Rabbinic School need the Graduate School of this or any other composition? The answer is an emphatic yes. A faculty of twelve professors would easily suffice for teaching eighty-five rabbinic students. The Breslau seminary had half a dozen instructors for about thirty to forty (? , my recollection) students, and the contribution over the years of this small faculty to Jewish learning is impressive. It is the good fortune of the Rabbinic School that it has a faculty of well over two dozen instructors. This luck and luxury is provided and can easily be defended by the existence of the Graduate School. How many students does a class of Sumerian or one of textual criticism of the Old Testament need for its justification? It follows that if the Graduate School shrivels, the faculty available to the Rabbinic School will shrink, and no tenure will protect a professor whose job has disappeared. His fate

will be that of auto workers or steel workers with high seniority which the country has witnessed recently, and the destiny of the Hebrew Union College in mid-America will be that of the smoke-stack industries in the same region. If this analysis sounds unwarrantedly alarming or pessimistic, it ought to be refuted by a counteranalysis. We may look wistfully at Hanover, N.H., Cambridge, England, or Goettingen, Germany -- small or medium-size places with great schools, but these examples do not necessarily apply to the Hebrew Union College, much as we would all agree that they should. The foothold of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati has been somewhat tenuous for some time. The agitation, caused by the Informal Memo, has weakened it gratuitously.

AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES



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