

Memorial for Gerson D. Cohen

October 8, 1991

Like many other people in this room, I too owe my career to Gerson Cohen. But rather than dwell on the obvious -- how he transformed this institution into a modern university; how he handpicked his own students to become teachers and scholars in their own right; and how he demanded of others no less than what he demanded of himself -- I would like to memorialize his role/as a spiritual mentor.

Gerson Cohen did not know me from Adam when he plucked me from obscurity. What he wanted was someone to introduce Yiddish literature into a Seminary curriculum that had treated Yiddish culture with indifference and disdain. At my job interview, which took place in his office in December 1974, he put me at my ease my first regaling me with stories about the fanatical opposition to Yiddish evinced by the former chancellor of the Seminary. And that was just a warm-up for his incannily accurate imitation of the Yiddish spoken by New York's/leading Yiddishists. Then he got done to business. He wanted to know if I had ever studied any Talmud, and what, in general was my Judaic background over and above my specialized training in literature. Then he wanted to know, and I quote, "Would another member of the faculty feel comfortable eating in ~~my~~^{your} home." That is how he set his mind at rest that by importing ~~this contraband~~^{Yiddish} into the

Yiddish-rein precincts of the Seminary he was not about to hire a treyfniak, or worse yet, some anti-religious fanatic of the Yom Kippur ball variety. I understood then that the Seminary was no laughing matter for Gerson Cohen and that teaching here would demand an existential commitment.

Our teaching, however, is what mattered to him most, as the next episode will show. Like most everyone else on the Seminary faculty, I soon found myself inundated with offers to teach outside the institution. One such offer, not from a synagogue but from a university, conflicted with my teaching schedule. And so, rooky that I was, I wrote to Gerson asking permission to reschedule a class so that I might deliver the guest lecture. I received by return mail a typed letter from the Chancellor informing me that to compromise my teaching responsibilities at JTS for any reason whatsoever was an act of hillul hashem. Now sacrilege is obviously not an operative category in the Seminary's Rules of Governance, and Gerson had no intention of ~~excommunicating~~ ^{banishing} me for ~~this~~ ²⁾ desecration ~~of~~ ^{language} God's Name. But the message he conveyed, in the most forceful ~~way~~ ^{language} he knew ~~how~~, is that teaching is a sacred act. Not for naught was Gerson a Kohen, a High Priest entrusted with enforcing the laws of purity.

He also attended the morning minyan. When my father died, fifteen years ago, and I became a daily minyanaire myself, I once ended up at the Seminary chapel and, as is the custom, was honored with leading the service. And since I was so intent on doing everything right, I did everything wrong. I did not know,

for starters, that the elderly gentlemen standing behind me was Saul Lieberman, and that one had to wait for him, in his capacity as the Seminary's Rabbi, to complete the recitation of the Sh'ma. (It was Joe Brodie who extricated me from that faux pas after the fact.) But that was only for starters. When Shakhris concluded, Gerson put his arm around me and took me up to his office. There he presented me with ²~~this~~ little siddur, the Rinat Yisrael. It seems I had gotten all the accents wrong, due to a profound confusion between the so-called Sephardic pronunciation that I had learned in school, and the so-called Ashkenazic pronunciation that I had tried to teach myself. The Rinat Yisrael had a unique system of diacritical marks to teach people like me how to pronounce the words properly. Now did Gerson Cohen believe that God would not understand my prayers if I mispronounced the words? Of course not. The proper pronunciation of Hebrew was for him a form of hiddur mitsvah, a way of embellishing the commandments, of going that little extra distance to make the service of God something pleasing to the eye and to the ear as well.

Though I never went back to davn in the Chapel again, Gerson coopted me two years later to deliver a sermon on the night of Selikhes. There, I am proud to say, I broke new ground by drawing my sermonic texts from modern Yiddish prose and poetry and I then proceeded to lead the congregation in a hasidic niggun. Gerson loved it, as I learned from a long letter he dictated the very next morning. He took pride in "the ongoing process of Torah" that could rescue religious significance from the writings

of Glatstein, Sutzkever, and Sholem Aleichem. He also loved the niggun for adding "a new dimension to our worship." But at the end of this love letter, he corrected the only biblical quotation I had made that evening, from Isaiah 62:5. "Jerusalem is feminine," he reminded me, "and so is the attribution of its walls -- homotayyikh, not homotekha."

Gerson Cohen combined two very different models of religious leadership: the intellectual rigor of the Vilna Gaon and the rebellious temper of the Kotsker Rebbe. He refused to accept any division between scholarship and Torah. He insisted that respect for style and language were means of achieving spiritual excellence. And even as he excelled in every area of his endeavor, he taught us that the measure of greatness is the ability to change, and to be humbled.

The momentous change in his position on the ordination of women, that happened as he travelled the country and listened to what ordinary Jews were saying, is a matter of historical record. Less known but no less significant is the lecture he delivered to the faculty on ~~the~~⁹ Oct. 23, 1979. It was titled "The Hebrew Crusade Chronicles and the Ashkenazi Tradition" and it dealt brilliantly with the way early Ashkenaz used history for liturgical purposes. At the end, during the question and answer period, he regretted the neglect by Jewish historians of Ashkenazic Jewry. And then he explained: We were too embarrassed by its religious intensity. Sephardic Jewry was safer and more cerebral.

I have never known anyone else who could make an admission like that. I have never known anyone who channeled so much religious passion into the dispassionate study of Hebrew texts. Never will I again have a mentor who, in pursuit of scholarly and pedagogic excellence, monitored my spiritual growth with so much love. With so much love.