

THE JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF AMERICA

3080 BROADWAY • NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10027

212 RIVERSIDE 9-8000

OFFICE OF THE CHANCELLOR

CABLE ADDRESS: SEMINARY, NEW YORK

December 21, 1979

Dear Colleague,

By now you have heard through the media that our faculty senate decided by a vote of twenty-five to nineteen to table the question of the ordination of women as rabbis in Conservative Judaism. I believe that this vote is tantamount to a defeat of ordination for the foreseeable future. It is, however, the decision of my colleagues, and I accept it, as I know you will, as an expression of their sincere conviction that this is not the time to admit women to the Rabbinical School.

The resolution passed by the senate called upon me to appoint a committee of talmudic scholars to complete a systematic study of the status of women in Jewish law, continuing that "The proper resolution of the ordination question can be achieved only in this larger context." I am not convinced at this time that such a committee could make any fruitful addition to the work of the Commission on the Ordination of Women, reported to you in January, or to the papers written on both sides of the issue by members of the faculty in preparation for yesterday's decision. I therefore informed my faculty colleagues in advance of the vote that I would not feel bound, either legally or morally, to appoint such a committee, and shall not do so unless, on reflection, I become convinced that its work would be productive.

As you know, in the three years in which the question of women as rabbis has occupied the forefront of our attention, I personally have moved from ambivalence on, or mild opposition to, ordination to passionate advocacy of the proposal. I believe that others have also had occasion to examine their positions. Many have changed their opinions, others have adopted new rationales for the views they continue to hold. The most positive element in this whole experience has been the willingness of the Seminary faculty to confront this issue directly, in a way that cut across all disciplinary lines. The mechanisms of Jewish law will, I believe, be forever enriched by the knowledge we have gained in our study of this question.

The faculty papers -- especially those by Robert Gordis, Simon Greenberg, and Joel Roth -- are so significant that they will help Conservative Judaism to discover its true identity -- its commitment to halakhah, and the process through which we can use that commitment to bring our tradition into confrontation with, and make it responsive to, modernity. I plan, therefore, to see that all the papers are prepared for publication as soon as possible, so that each of you will have access to them as you continue to reflect upon this issue. I also hope that this volume will prove a useful tool in adult education, enabling us to orient our laity to the real meaning of Conservative Judaism, and to the processes of halakhic development.

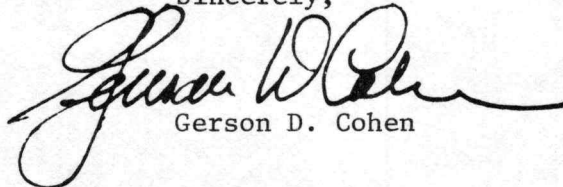
I believe that ultimately, when our Movement becomes more confident of its own identity, we will ordain women. In the meantime, I believe we are all morally bound to open to the dedicated women among us new avenues for spiritual service. We must also strive for a broadened perception of the role of women as religious teachers, and we must learn to distinguish between women's legitimate concern for spiritual fulfillment in our society and the demands of the women's liberation movement, which are qualitatively quite different and separate from the issues we face. In writing thus, I am concerned not alone for the women whose aspirations have been frustrated, but also for our communities, which can ill afford the loss of this dedicated leadership.

I plan to address a plenary session of students and faculty sometime in mid-January, when I shall analyze for our academic community the significance of the senate vote. It is my hope that that meeting will encourage and aid a healing process which may already have begun, and that it will help us toward maturity as a movement.

The diversity and the pluralism which have always been characteristic of our Movement can be both assets and threats. This is not the first time that we have wondered whether it was not necessary to place limits on that diversity in order to retain essential Judaism. The debates of the past months will be most useful if we learn from them that as our Movement becomes stronger and more self-aware, its tolerance for diversity also increases, and its growing ability to confront profound religious issues is a further sign of its institutional health.

With warm good wishes for 1980 and the years ahead.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gerson D. Cohen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Gerson D. Cohen

GDC:sa