

THE JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF AMERICA

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CABLE ADDRESS: SEMINARY NEW YORK

May 16, 1983

Dear Colleague:

In December, 1979, after deliberations which followed on the report of a two-year study on the question of ordaining women, the Seminary Faculty resolved to table the issue. It also resolved that if and when the matter were to be raised again, ample opportunity be provided for a thorough study of all of its ramifications. Since then, the various aspects of the issue have been discussed, in varying degrees of intensity, among rabbis, scholars, and laypersons alike. In addition, we have seen a growing consensus among the Conservative Jewish laity that women ought to be admitted to the Conservative rabbinate, and opinion within the Rabbinical Assembly has also shifted dramatically. The result of this shift was, as you know, that 73.7% of the R.A.'s convention voted several weeks ago to admit a woman to membership. Indeed, it was only because of the rule requiring a 75% majority that this woman, who was by all accounts eminently qualified, was denied membership by a margin of four votes out of 285 cast.

It is no secret that I have strong views on this matter, and that I believe it is in the interest of Torah and of all of us on the Seminary Faculty for our institution to exercise leadership for the Conservative Movement on this vital issue. The debate at the R.A. convention reflected the extent to which votes were influenced by respect for the Seminary and its faculty. It was very heartening to see the extent to which that reverence still prevades the Rabbinical Assembly. Its members do not want to compete with us, nor do they seek to usurp our authority to ordain rabbis. Many negative votes clearly flowed from precisely these sentiments, and that was very moving to me. It is, by the same token, a clear signal that we can no longer evade responsibility. The issue of the admission of women to the Rabbinical School can no longer be held in abeyance.

For this reason, I am calling a meeting of the Faculty Assembly for Monday, October 24, at 1:00 P.M. The place, which I hope will be in our new building, will be announced at a later date. Should the time conflict with teaching responsibilities, I urge you to schedule a make-up class. At this meeting, I shall move to have the issue of the admission of women to the Rabbinical School discussed, debated, and voted on.

I am calling the meeting for October in keeping with the expressed desire of the faculty for as much opportunity as possible for thorough study. I invite you all to use the summer to further research the halakhic and ethical implications of the issue, and to write papers, if you wish, which can serve as the basis for our concluding discussion and debate in October. The Seminary will be happy to reproduce any such papers and to distribute them, prior to October 1, to all members of the Faculty Assembly. In addition, the position papers pre-

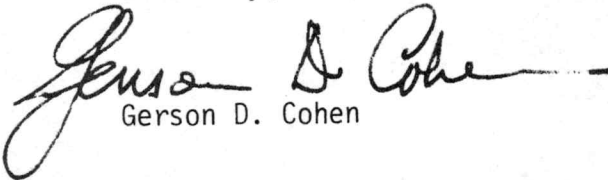
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pared by several of our colleagues four years ago will be available, free of charge to members of the faculty, from the office of the Seminary Comptroller.

Because this issue is not a new one, and because we have all thought about it a great deal, I expect that we will be able to reach a conclusion at the October 24th meeting. Obviously, debate will have to be limited in order to accomplish this, and appropriate ground rules will be set for that meeting, I believe that the five months between now and October, added to the thought, discussion, and writing which have already been devoted to the subject, will mean that an adequate cooperative exploration of the question at hand will take place within those rules. I anticipate that our meeting, if it is to reveal mahloket, will only reveal those that are for the sake of Torah, and that our decision will reflect both devotion to our tradition and a sensitivity to our world and to our young people, whose education is our foremost responsibility.

With all good wishes for a productive and refreshing summer.

Sincerely,



Gerson D. Cohen