

THE JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF AMERICA

MEMORANDUM

TO: The Faculty Assembly

DATE: November 19, 1985

FROM: Raymond P. Scheindlin



SUBJECT:

1. As already announced, the Faculty Assembly will meet on Monday, November 25, to take up the proposals regarding the use of Hebrew at the Seminary that were put forward at our meeting of October 17. From the reactions that have come to me, it is clear that this matter is one of great concern to the faculty; I expect a lively discussion yielding important results. Please bring with you the memorandum that I circulated summarizing the October 17 proposal.

2. Following Professor Roskies' ingenious presentation at the Faculty Assembly meeting of November 11, I received the attached letter from Professor Greenstein. With his permission, (but on my own initiative) I am circulating it to keep the subject alive pending a further meeting. We will take this matter up at a subsequent Faculty Assembly meeting, since the November 25 meeting will be devoted entirely to the Hebrew question.

I look forward to seeing you on the 25th. Please call my office if you are unable to attend.

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THE JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF AMERICA

MEMORANDUM

TO: Ray Scheindlin, Dovid Roskies,
Gordon Tucker

DATE: 11/12/85

FROM: Ed Greenstein

I wanted to formulate some reaction to the marvelous presentation Dovid made at the Faculty Assembly meeting yesterday. At the risk of presenting a response that is half-baked, I want to convey some ideas while they are fresh. I know that some colleagues share some of the same reactions.

I don't see rabbinical school curriculum in academic areas to serve as either practical rabbinics or homiletics. It seemed to me that Dovid wanted to teach homiletics. I think rabbis should acquire the academic tools to deal with the material of which homilies are made. Modern literature is part of that material. If the literature instructor wishes to deal with the homiletical application of literature, that could be part of the instructor's work. But it should not exempt the instructor from teaching some literary strategies. Rabbis today face congregations with members who know about literature. We should equip rabbis to deal with literature in sophisticated ways. Now, what Dovid did was to emphasize the comparative literary approach rather than the close reading approach with the rabbinical class. I don't see why close reading would be any less meaningful to rabbis. When a rabbi reads the newspaper he/she does not (I would hope) read only the Jewish interest articles. In reading a story, I would hope the rabbi would be interested in more than the homiletical use of it. Nevertheless, close reading can lend itself to teaching in synagogues as much as the latter approach Dovid presented. I think a teacher should broaden, not narrow, the student's mind.

To teach rabbinical students under the assumption that they are not interested in serious academic study and will not need it for their work demeans the students and the rabbinic task. My experience is that many rabbinical students thrive on academic approaches and that many rabbis wish they knew more about them. Rabbinical training in homiletics is best done by seasoned rabbis who have an inclination to share their stuff. Texts and history are best taught in academic settings by academicians, the ones who are devoted to academic study.

Like rabbis in the pulpit who sometimes succumb to the values of their congregations, we may want to give our rabbinical students the material they can directly use. I don't think we should strive to pander to our students, though. They may want homer lidrush, but that is not ours to give. They must learn our homer and learn, too, to translate it for others. I think rabbinical students should know something of the academic study of Judaism. They will have to do the work of transfer

from academics to popular teaching. Perhaps we at the Seminary should do more to help them in the process of transfer. But I don't think we should give short-shrift to the academic side.

What was clear to me, and to those with whom I discussed Dovid's talk later, is that Dovid was much more natural and interesting in the first presentation. He enjoyed the material more and seemed to find considerably more meaning in it in the first part of his presentation, the academic one. I think any class would find the same.

What I appreciated most from Dovid's thesis is the need for us to train rabbinical students, and anyone else who will teach, to translate academic analysis to personal application. I don't agree at all with Dovid that academic analysis is objective or any less personal than homiletics. But I do agree that we have this need for translation skills, so to speak. Dovid has felt the need and jumped into the breach. I don't think that academicians can all do that training, but someone here should.

All the best,
Ed Greenstein