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Source: *Tradition*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Spring 1999), pp. 88-93

Published by: [Rabbinical Council of America](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23262204>

Accessed: 28/06/2014 15:54

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From the Pages of Tradition

RABBI DAVID TSEVI HOFFMANN ON ORTHODOX INVOLVEMENT WITH THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY

When, in the early 1920's, serious planning for a Jewish University in Jerusalem got underway, the Orthodox community was put into a quandary. The notion of a university in Jerusalem in which heretical ideas, in particular biblical criticism, were taught was not something most Orthodox Jews could easily stomach. As can be imagined, there were great protests by many leading East European scholars, which reached their peak around the time of the April 1, 1925 formal inauguration of the institution. Adding to the consternation of the Orthodox leaders was that many of the university's partisans viewed its inauguration in almost utopian terms, even affixing the verse "For out of Zion shall come forth Torah" to the new university.¹

Not surprisingly, the German Orthodox followers of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, whose commitment to secular studies was equaled by their strident opposition to *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and organizational affiliation with the non-Orthodox, were very vocal in this battle. For them, while it was entirely proper, in accordance with the *Torah im Derekh Erets* ideal, to attend a non-Jewish university, it was absolutely forbidden to have any involvement with a Jewish university in which heresy was countenanced.²

In the years before the establishment of the Hebrew University and the Institute for Jewish Studies, which in 1928 became part of the university's humanities faculty, those in the Orthodox world with a more liberal outlook were also engaged in discussions about this matter, both among themselves and with those who were at the forefront of establishing the new university. Both the mathematician Dr. Abraham Fraenkel and the Orientalist Dr. Eugen Mittwoch took part in the meetings concerning the proposed university when it was only in the planning stages, and Mittwoch was one of a number of intellectuals

who met in Berlin as early as February 2, 1920 to discuss the possibility of establishing a faculty of Jewish studies in Jerusalem. After the university was established, and in an effort to satisfy the Orthodox, it was proposed on a number of occasions that two Bible scholars be appointed, one who would teach in accordance with the traditional method and one in accordance with modern biblical criticism. Although the faculty of Jewish studies actually approved this proposal, it was never instituted.³

R. Abraham Isaac Kook, the Chief Rabbi of Palestine, who viewed the emerging yishuv in a much more positive light than his rabbinic colleagues, went so far as to take part in the Hebrew University's inauguration, giving a speech which his opponents later distorted in their efforts to defame him.⁴ Although it is reported that R. Kook later regretted his appearance at the inauguration, after it became clear to him that biblical criticism was, contrary to what he had been led to believe, destined to remain an integral part of the curriculum, he still believed that Orthodox Jews should involve themselves with the university. In a letter to Abraham Fraenkel, dated June 18, 1928, he wrote as follows:

By now you must certainly have received my telegram, in which I agree with your accepting the position at the university here. Even though there are problems with the university, we cannot avoid our obligation to do battle in order to ensure a proper presence that will look after the interests of traditional Judaism and increase its influence. This can only be done by increasing the number of religious professors. I hope that your influence over the general atmosphere of the university and the life of the students will be great, and you will also be an example to the other professors through your proper conduct and Torah-true lifestyle.⁵

The Rabbinical Seminary of Berlin, whose board of trustees included Fraenkel, also had a more liberal approach to the Hebrew University than most of the rabbinic world. In April 1925 it sent a letter of encouragement to mark the opening of the Hebrew University, in which, to be sure, it expressed the hope that the studies carried out in Jerusalem would uphold the glory of the Torah.⁶ Bernard Revel, the president of the institution soon to be known as Yeshiva College, was another important rabbinic figure who sent the Hebrew University a flowery letter of congratulations upon its inauguration, but not without first securing R. Kook's approval.⁷

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Since R. David Tsevi Hoffmann (1843-1921) was the leading halakhist in Germany, and rector of the Rabbinical Seminary of Berlin, it is not surprising that Abraham Fraenkel also asked his opinion of Orthodox participation in the projected new university. As can be seen in the letters published here, his opinion was more stringent than that of R. Kook. In fact, since his conditions were never met, R. Hoffmann must be regarded as opposing Orthodox involvement with the university, and one wonders whether he would have approved of the letter sent by the Rabbinical Seminary to the Hebrew University four years after his death. Although he was a strong believer in secular studies, R. Hoffmann was also an adherent of the policy of religious separatism advocated by Hirsch and his own teacher R. Esriel Hildesheimer. He therefore insisted that at this new university there be no organizational or financial ties with the non-Orthodox. Needless to say, none of these requirements were necessary when it came to Orthodox Jews teaching at non-Jewish universities.

R. Hoffmann's letters are found in the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People P40/169, and I thank the directors of the archives for granting me permission to publish them. I also thank Dr. Stephen Garrin for preparing the first draft of a translation from the German.

Berlin January 29, 1920

Most honorable Dr.,

It is of the utmost importance that careful measures be taken that the students not be misled by their teachers to disbelief. This is so not only in the sense that the teachers must not launch a direct attack on the Bible, but even indirectly. For example, in a lesson on natural sciences if a contradiction with a biblical teaching results, it causes the students, for whom the Bible is unerring, either to reject the teaching of natural science or to justify the Bible in the manner of the apologists. It cannot be tolerated that in the case of such a science lesson, the teacher will make malicious remarks against the Bible, and thereby offend the sensibilities of the religious students. An honorable teacher would not do that. There are, however, those who are not merely themselves unbelievers, but derive pleasure in deriding the faithful. These should not be tolerated.

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Even if this were not to happen—and I do not fear it—one must still consider if the Orthodox should be satisfied with boycotting those teachers who are *mumarim le-hakhis*, or if other means should be employed. In any case, the Orthodox should not withdraw from the outset, for the more influence the Orthodox gain over the guidance of the university, the more there is a guaranty that the podium will not become a propaganda instrument for the unbelievers to misuse.

With greetings.

Respectfully,
Dr. D. Hoffmann

Berlin, January 4, 1920⁸

Most Honorable Dr.,

As with you, I am also of the opinion that the distancing of the Orthodox from the university to be established in Jerusalem will entail ruinous consequences for Palestinian Jewry. Although many believe that participation in this undertaking can be regarded as assisting the work of sinners, I hold the contrary opinion, that the abandoning of such an institution to the circle of the enemies of traditional Judaism is more of a support and furtherance of this direction than they themselves could ever have wished for. They would freely spread their destructive teachings at the university and in a short time would win over the whole intelligentsia to their side.

I think, therefore, that the Orthodox must endeavor to win the greatest influence over this institution, and since it will not succeed in totally excluding the Reform elements, two faculties must be established for the biblical-talmudic fields, each with its own particular administration, both with respect to financial as well as spiritual matters, so that one faculty has nothing in common with the other and one is not responsible for the other's conduct.

Both of these faculties, we will refer to them as the theological faculties, must also be separated from the faculties that teach neutral subjects, so that the Orthodox, who are involved in the promotion of the latter, do not indirectly support the spread of anti-religious teachings.

If it is necessary in some teaching situations, such as Jewish history or philosophy, to assert a certain religious point of view, then this discipline must be assigned to the theological faculty.

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In general, I think that if the Orthodox obtain their proper influence on the university, they will understand how to set policy with respect to these as well as other questions, so that traditional Judaism will not get the short end but will rather be promoted and supported. In general, we must have faith that we will ultimately, with God's help, emerge victorious from every battle. "And the Lord thy God will bless thee in all that thou doest [*Deut.* 15:18]." But we cannot sit with our hands folded in our laps.

Respectfully,
Dr. D. Hoffmann

Berlin, May 2, 1920

Most honorable Dr.,

Since I do not have *Der Israelit* at home and I do not have time to borrow it from the library in order to read it, and I only have time to glance at the other papers that were sent to me, thus, as I have often stated, in political questions I am an *am ha-arets*, that is, I do not consider myself competent to offer an authoritative judgment. Therefore, before answering your first letter I requested Dr. [Ezra] Munk to call a conference of several colleagues in order to deliberate together concerning the questions that you posed. The result of this consultation is that which I wrote to you in my first letter. In response to your second letter, I did not have the opportunity of such a conference. Therefore, I cannot declare my expressed opinion as definitive, as long as I do not know the opposing view and its reasons. Since Orthodoxy is split into two camps, it is extremely rare for common agreement to be arrived at. Thus, you may transmit my first letter as the result of a joint deliberation with my local colleagues. I wish to distance myself from my second letter and to consult with other experts in this matter.

Hoffman

NOTES

1. For declarations against the grandiose statements at the university's inauguration, and against the university per se, by R. Israel Meir haKohen (*Hafets Hayyim*) and the *bet din* of the Jerusalem separatist community, led by R. Joseph Hayyim Sonnenfeld, see *Der Israelit*, April 23, 1925. See also

- ibid., Jan. 29, Feb. 12, April 2, 8, June 11, 1925. For R. Yeruham Levovitz's reaction, see his lecture published in *Yated Ne'eman*, 13 Sivan, 5746.
2. See Rabbi Winkler, "Klarheit und Wahrheit," *Der Israelit*, July 12, 1925.
 3. See David N. Myers, *Reinventing the Jewish Past* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 49, 105, 200 n. 62, 223 n. 185.
 4. See Moshe Maimon Alharar, *Li-Khvoda shel Torah* (Jerusalem, 1988); Shnayer Z. Leiman, "Rabbi Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook: Invocation of the Hebrew University," *Tradition* 29 (Fall 1994), pp. 87-92.
 5. Moshe Tsurie, *Otserot haReiya* vol. 4 (Tel Aviv, 1993), p. 190. See also Fraenkel's *Lebenskreise* (Stuttgart, 1967), pp. 189-91, and his articles "Die hebraische Universitat der 'Israelit' und Kavod haTorah," *Judisches Wochenblatt*, Feb. 6, 1925, and "Die Antwort," *ibid.*, Feb. 20, 1925. Fraenkel accepted R. Kook's opinion and went on to become rector of the university.
 6. *Der Israelit*, April 8, 1925. In 1937 the Rabbinical Seminary of Berlin sent the Jewish Theological Seminary of America greetings on the occasion of the latter's fiftieth anniversary. See *Jahres-Bericht des Rabbiner-Seminars zu Berlin für die Jahre 1936 und 1937* (Berlin, 1938), p. 10. As was the case concerning the Hebrew University, the Hirschians regarded the Jewish Theological Seminary as a center of heresy which certainly was not deserving of any acknowledgment on its anniversary.
 7. See Sinai Leichter and Hayyim Milkov (eds.), *Olei haSertifikatim* (Jerusalem 1993), p. 337; Ya'akov Filber, *Kokhvei Ohr* (Jerusalem, 1993) pp. 258-9.
 8. This is the date in the typed transcription of the Hoffman's letter, but it is clearly mistaken. Presumably 4/1/1920 should read 1/4/1920. From letter no. 3 it is obvious that this is the second letter Hoffman wrote, for it is here that he presents his personal opinion. It also appears as letter no. 2 in the collection in the Central Archives.