

## A SEMINARY STUDENT IN THE COLUMBIA CRISIS

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**E**VERY COMMITTED JEW can be said to live in two worlds. Sometimes these worlds mesh together and, like gears, give life an added drive. Sometimes these worlds clash and strip one of unnoticed illusions. My two worlds collided in the Spring of 1968, during the student protests on the campus of Columbia University.

As a student in the Combined Program of the Seminary and Columbia University, I had considered that program's purpose to help me integrate as much as possible the Jewish world of practice, idea and emotion with the secular world in which I live. Nowhere did that integration attempt prove more necessary and of more concern than during the days of crisis at Columbia. As a person who never before took a radical position on anything, I found myself caught up in events which overpowered me, which forced me to think about issues and problems never before very meaningful or immediate to me. The crisis at Columbia pointed up the terribly complex problems facing the modern university, raised the basic problem of which means justify which ends, and pointed up the relevance of Judaism to me.

Events at the university began innocently enough one Tuesday afternoon in April, 1968, when two sizeable groups of students gathered on campus—one group protesting the academic disciplining of six S.D.S. members who had been involved in a forbidden indoor demonstration against the university's participation in the Institute for Defense Analysis; the second group protesting against the S.D.S. protest. This was followed by a march to the site of Columbia's projected gymnasium in Morningside Park. The following days witnessed the occupation of Hamilton Hall, the holding of a Dean as hostage in his office, the invasion of the offices of Columbia's President, the occupation of addi-

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tional buildings, and finally the intervention of the City police force, at the university administration's request.

During the period prior to the police "bust", the student body coalesced into various groups: those occupying buildings as a final attempt to reach an administration which had failed to listen to more normal means of protest; those who opposed both the demands and the tactics; those who supported the demands of the "occupiers" but who could not accept their tactics (among whom I was numbered); and as always, a great number of apathetic students. I believe that of all the groups on campus, the one with which I identified myself was, perhaps, the most frustrated. I shall never forget the night when so many of us in the same uneasy position of sympathizing with motives but being unable to identify with actions, sat unhappy around the campus sundial most of the night with candles aglow (very reminiscent of Tisha B'Av), singing quietly and listening to speakers.

Let me first say that I viewed most of the immediate demands and issues which caused the crisis as symbolic. Perhaps I did so because I am involved deeply in a tradition which attaches great symbolic import to time and events. My subsequent reasoning and actions were, strange as it may sound, influenced by my study of the Rambam. I have always been a good middle-of-the-roader, but during the developments on campus, I began to understand what the Rambam meant about sometimes having to take an extreme position in order to bring things back to a state of equilibrium.

I reacted strongly to the gymnasium issue, for I saw it as symbolic of the larger issue of the role which a modern university with its rich human and monetary resources must play in the community around it. The Institute for Defense Analysis symbolized my opposition to United States involvement in Vietnam, and in the larger perspective was symbolic of the university's involvement in secret research, an activity which is, I believe, totally alien to its nature and purpose. If there is to be one place in our society which is completely free, open and objective—it is the university. Nothing must impinge on the university's search for knowledge which is accessible to all who want or need it.

And finally, the role which the students and faculty sought to play in the decisions of the university was symbolic of the quest for participatory democracy in the larger society. The right of people affected by decisions to have a voice in the making of those decisions is a fundamental position of the student movement. These then were some of the issues which forced their way into my thinking; things I had given

little conscious thought to before others undertook extreme methods of protest and brought them to my awareness.

My frustration over my inability to express my feelings as radically as did those who were occupying university buildings had its catharsis the morning after the first police "bust", when I joined a mass student-faculty strike protesting the presence of the police on the campus and the violence they had displayed.

The night of police action, which has been thoroughly reported in several recent publications, was one of utter horror for me and my friends. It affected me deeply, both as an American—and as a Jew. The Talmud, in *Masekhet Sanhedrin* teaches that a judge who sentences a criminal to a punishment must be present to see the punishment administered, else he is as guilty as the criminal. It is significant that those who ordered the police action on the Columbia campus were not present to see it carried out. I believe the rule in the Talmud was intended to force a judge to temper justice with mercy. I wonder whether the Columbia administrators had any idea of the violence they were condoning when they invited the police on campus. . . .

It was this night of horror which made me feel, for the first time perhaps, even in the smallest way, what it was like for the Jews in Europe or the Negroes in Harlem. (Forgive this perhaps unfortunate comparison, but my life has been sheltered and that night was the closest I had ever come to any conception of the terror caused by the "forces of law and order".)

The police actions were the major factor in unifying many students like myself. Thereafter I was no longer able to remain silent out of fear of allying myself with S.D.S. I had become "radicalized".

I was subsequently elected by the Seminary students who attend Columbia to represent them on a Strike Coordinating Committee comprised of students from various schools within the university. For several weeks while the committee met to help formulate demands and plan tactics I aligned myself with the moderates who sought to keep S.D.S. in check and not cause confrontation for its own sake. During this period I gained the most profound respect for the democratic system and simultaneously learned just how frustratingly slow a process it is. The meetings were conducted according to strict parliamentary procedure, and the minority opinion was always heard and weighed. Unfortunately, the moderates were forced to withdraw from this effort to unify the students when they realized, after reaching the limit of acceptable compromise, that it was the purpose of S.D.S. not to remake

the university, but to destroy it as the first revolutionary step in overturning our whole society. The moderates then formed their own group dedicated to the restructuring of the university.

Looking back at these events in the perspective of time elapsed, I know that I had never thought it possible to become involved in active issues as I did. But I saw that as a Jew I could not remain silent. During the days of upheaval on the Columbia campus I had many heated debates with my teachers at the Seminary. They are men whom I deeply admire, men who have lived through infinitely worse crises. Some of my teachers supported me, as I believe they should have, for they had taught me the values which were motivating me. But I was deeply troubled and could not understand the deep conviction of many teachers that what we students were doing was wrong.

It was not until the death of Robert Kennedy that I began to understand and to accept their position. It then became evident to me that no one can ever say with any ultimate authority which means justifies which ends, which right cause is the most worthy and the most needed, to the extent of ignoring other rightful causes. No one can judge which particular act, be it violent in itself or producing violence, is correct in any given situation.

Because no one can be such a judge, I turned to the position that no man, no matter what the reason, can justify violence of any kind. Although our system often moves along at an overwhelmingly slow and frustrating rate, we must suffer in the immediate moment if we are to be secure in the long run. I believe that the students' actions at Columbia helped create or intensify a climate in this country which made it easier for a man like Sirhan Sirhan to commit his crime. Student willingness to support those who saw violence as their only recourse helped America to be less shocked than it should have been at Kennedy's death (as witnessed by the "plethora" of gun laws since passed . . .). I now see what my teachers meant when they counselled me against involving myself in any way with such violence.

I think the best example of how my two worlds came together can be seen in the following incident. I had been studying the laws of capital punishment in Sanhedrin. In one *sugya* I read that a witness to a legal proceeding cannot later become a judge in the same case. This is a fairly widespread principle of law, but I learned it in a Jewish context, in a religious institution. Meanwhile, at Columbia, those men who were the objects of student protest, who had witnessed the events, were also the ones beginning to accuse individuals, indict them, order disciplinary

action, judge and sentence them. Thus I found myself in the position of being taught one thing in the Seminary, and seeing the exact opposite practiced up the hill by men who supposedly were educators.

As a Jew who feels strongly about the relevance of his tradition in today's world, I could do no less than abhor the conduct of the university administrators. I believe sincerely that my involvement in the Columbia crisis was directly attributable to my commitment to the Jewish tradition. And it was that tradition which helped me to measure and weigh, and eventually to modify, my position in the light of Judaism's insistence on using the proper means (as slow as they may be) to achieve the goals which most of us would agree are correct.