

Sh'ma

a journal of Jewish responsibility

15/281, NOVEMBER 16, 1984

Fighting anti-semitism at wellesley

Jerold S. Auerbach

Anti-Semitism is always repugnant, even in an institution as benign and genteel as Wellesley College. No glaring episode, or ugly incident disrupted the normal serenity of college life. Instead, there was abundant evidence of a persistent pattern: a history of discrimination, a legacy of insensitivity.

Wellesley College, according to its statutes, was founded "for the glory of God and the service of the Lord Jesus Christ." Wellesley students were expected to regard "Christian character" as "*the most radiant crown of womanhood*." They were encouraged to spend their lives "in humble imitation of Him who *'came not to be ministered unto, but to minister'*"— the phrase that still serves as the college motto. Until five years ago every trustee, faculty member, and officer was required by college statute (although not in practice) to belong to an evangelical church.

Christian exclusivity was moderated over time into a formal quota system, which restricted Jewish students to eight to ten percent of each entering class. (Jews, according to a college policy statement, possessed "identifiable physical features.") Wellesley retained its Jewish quota until the late 1940's, when Massachusetts fair practices legislation required its abandonment— over the opposition of Wellesley's president. After a steady rise in the admission of Jewish applicants during the 50's, the percentage steadily receded until, currently, it is only slightly higher than during the quota years.

Jews "Not Qualified" to Teach Bible

For many decades the unofficial academic custo-

JEROLD AUERBACH *teaches history at Wellesley.*

1

dian of Christian culture at Wellesley was the Department of Religion, Bible study was required of every student until 1969. Successive presidents insisted that Jewish scholars were inherently unqualified to teach the New Testament. Thus, not until the Bible requirement was dropped did the Religion Department (over strenuous internal opposition) hire its first Jewish member, whose term was punctuated by anti-Semitic harassment. Two years ago her successor, a distinguished and prolific young scholar, was not recommended for tenure, largely on the grounds of "personality." He retained legal counsel, who gathered evidence indicating that the negative tenure decision was "significantly influenced by the taint of anti-Semitism." With the threat of litigation and attendant publicity looming, the department decision was reversed— and the newly tenured scholar departed for a more congenial academic environment.

No sooner had the tenure issue receded than a series of student complaints provided dismaying evidence of persistent insensitivity toward Jews at the college. Jewish students reported frequent academic conflicts scheduled for major Jewish holidays; professorial denials of their requests to postpone assignments due on *Yom Kippur*; professorial displeasure at class absence due to holiday observances; a threat to eliminate the kosher meal plan (which presidential intervention halted); and the systematic avoidance by admissions recruiters of predominantly Jewish high schools. Even the college president conceded "a disturbing pattern" of insensitivity toward Jews. This is not altogether surprising in an institution that retains the Christian cross as the symbol of its spiritual life, holds its annual convocation ceremony (the first formal event of every academic year) in the Christian chapel, and unselfconsciously accepts its Christian symbolism as a neutral reflection of the natural order.

Wellesley's Anti-Semitism Made Public

So the pattern was set: a series of overt acts of discrimination or covert instances of insensitivity, invariably followed by presidential affirmations of the virtue of tolerance. Discrimination against Jews was never explicitly condemned, although Jews were the specific targets of discrimination. The pattern persisted until it was reported in outside media (the college newspaper remained conspicuously silent on the subject). In response to a *Commentary* article about anti-Semitism at Sarah Lawrence, I provided evidence drawn from Wellesley archives that demonstrated the identical pattern of restricted admissions and administrative bias. Not long afterward the *Jewish*

Advocate, perhaps alerted by the *Commentary* letter, published a comprehensive, careful, and shocking article with ample documentation of Wellesley's stunted transition from parochialism to pluralism.

Once Wellesley's dirty linen was washed in public, and only then, the shield of institutional decorum that concealed anti-Semitism was shattered. For the first time in college history it was possible, indeed urgently necessary, to conduct a full, open inquiry into anti-Semitism, discrimination, and insensitivity toward Jews at Wellesley. In successive faculty meetings, the primary forum for this debate, there were three pivotal issues (which surely resonate beyond Wellesley College). First, would discrimination directed specifically against Jews be specifically identified and condemned? Or would anti-Semitism vanish amid sweeping declarations of universal tolerance that were as insensitive to Jews as the original discriminatory acts? Second, would the pattern of discrimination be perceived as institutional, or would it be reduced to the isolated acts of mere individuals, for which there was no institutional responsibility or culpability? Finally, would the connections between past and present be acknowledged, and the burden of institutional history accepted, or would the claim of *tabula rasa* absolve Wellesley for everything prior to yesterday?

Faculty Condemns the Anti-Semitism

After a prolonged and excruciating debate, the faculty (amid thunderous administrative silence) finally acknowledged the evidence of anti-Semitism, condemned its history at Wellesley, committed the college to obliterate discrimination against Jews in recruitment, admission, employment, and promotion, and declared that insensitivity toward the religious obligations of Jews was impermissible. To assuage the universalists, the faculty also dedicated the college to the eradication of all forms of racial and religious (but not gender) prejudice.

A resolution is not a solution. But it carried significance, at least symbolically, in a college whose only official policy toward Jews had declared them an unwelcome presence. There followed tangible evidence of heightened attentiveness to the recruitment of Jewish students, and respect for their religious observance. Since the resolution called upon the president and trustees to affirm its principles, it seemed that Wellesley finally had turned an important institutional corner.

Regrettably, that happy ending was deferred.

Presidential silence was followed by the explicit refusal of the Board of Trustees to endorse the faculty resolution. The Board, with cavalier disregard of the history of restrictive quotas and hiring discrimination, denied that there was a history of anti-Semitism at Wellesley. Instead, it invented a mythical "history of dedication to diversity"— at a college where only white Christian women once were welcome. The Trustees deplored discrimination but refused to mention Jews by name— as though two months of debate had not concerned Jews. They affirmed "the moral imperative of the Founder," which, of course, was the foundation of Christian exclusivity. The Trustees managed to deny what everyone else in the college knew to be true. In this Wellesley Wonderland, where words lost all meaning, the president then proceeded to assert the compatibility of these diametrically opposed resolutions, one acknowledging and condemning anti-Semitism while the other did neither. Only a torrent of criticism— from faculty, Hillel, and concerned supporters— finally budged the trustees to the minimal concession that anti-Semitism had indeed been a problem at Wellesley and that it was deplorable.

Sh'ma

a journal of Jewish responsibility

Editor Eugene B. Borowitz

Assistant Editor Margaret Moers Wenig

Administrator Alicia Seeger

Production CLM Graphics

Art Abba Spero and Steven Mills

Contributing Editors Michael Berenbaum, J. David Bleich, Balfour Brickner, Mitchell Cohen, Daniel J. Elazar, Blu Greenberg, Susan Handelman, Paula Hyman, Nora Levin, David Novak, Harold Schulweis, Steven Schwarzschild, Seymour Siegel, Sharon Strassfeld, Elie Wiesel, Arnold Jacob Wolf, Michael Wyschogrod.

Sh'ma welcomes articles from diverse points of view.

Hence, the opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the editors. Donations to *Sh'ma* Inc. are tax-deductible.

Sh'ma is available in microform from University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Mi.

Send manuscripts to 198 St. James Place, Bklyn N.Y. 11238.

Address all other correspondence, subscriptions and change of address notices to Box 567, Port Washington, N.Y. 11050.

Sh'ma (ISSN 0049-0385) is published bi-weekly except June, July and August, by *Sh'ma* Inc., 735 Port Washington Blvd., Port Washington, N.Y. 11050. Subscriptions \$22 for two years in U.S. and Canada; \$12 a year overseas. 10 or more to one address, \$6 each per year. Retired or handicapped persons of restricted means may subscribe at half price.

Copyright © 1984 by *Sh'ma* Inc.

POSTMASTER: Please forward Form 3579 to Box 567, Port Washington, N.Y. 11050.

Second class postage paid at Port Washington, N.Y. and at additional entry Bethpage, N.Y.

15/281, November 16, 1984

The Problem of Jewish Acquiescence

So much for Wellesley's Jewish problem. There was, sadly, an even more insidious problem: Jewish acquiescence in, even denial of, discrimination that was, after all, directed against Jews. It is always easy to be lulled into complacent gratitude for the favors bestowed by an elite, esteemed, generous institution. It is tempting to lapse into self-congratulation for being not worthy (with a degree, an appointment, or a promotion) by such a prestigious college. Jewish students are especially vulnerable, for they hardly come to Wellesley to deepen their Jewish identities (although the college, inadvertently, may help them to do so), untenured faculty are understandably anxious lest they jeopardize their promotion possibilities.

The most distressing forms of Jewish self-degradation occurred among senior faculty and trustees. Every dismal stereotype provided by centuries of Jewish life in the Diaspora was recreated at Wellesley. Court Jews truly committed to their people, aligned themselves with their institutional benefactor. Jewish universalists, committed to every worthy liberal cause, could not bear to identify and condemn discrimination against Jews. Assimilated Jews retreated behind the veil of civility and decorum that define good manners among the Christian elite whom they emulate. And self-hating Jews, who usually identify as Jews only to legitimate their condemnation of Israel, engaged in extraordinary forms of linguistic agility to affirm the complexity of the issues in order to deny the existence of anti-Semitism. Cutting across all categories and ranks were the Jews of silence, who could not stir themselves to utter a word in public against anti-Semitism. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the struggle to frame an acceptable faculty resolution was largely an intramural Jewish battle, while the bemused, or indifferent, majority watched from the sidelines. And, needless to say, the Trustees' resolution, which denied that anti-Semitism was even a problem, was proposed by a Jew, and affirmed by every Jewish trustee.

Unwilling to be Jews in Public

Jews at Wellesley are not significantly different from Jews in other academic, business, and professional institutions: willing to be Jews at home (perhaps); but on the street, and at work, determined to be professors, executives, lawyers and doctors. Our split lives affirm our "enlightenment," enabling us to separate public and private, personal and professional, religion and nationality. So Wellesley Jews confront, or evade, the

same tormenting dilemmas of acculturation, identity, and loyalty that beset most American Jews. When anti-Semitism lurks, or insensitivity simmers, it is all too tempting to remain silent— or to blame other Jews for instigating trouble.

With hindsight, it is possible to appreciate how any struggle against anti-Semitism turns upon an accurate assessment of institutional strengths and vulnerabilities. Wellesley's image as a liberal, respected college enabled us to turn its professed values of diversity and tolerance to our advantage, even though we knew all too well that these values were violated in practice. In such a traditional institution, where hoop-rolling is more venerated than boat-rocking, it was imperative to equate the condemnation of anti-Semitism with traditional virtues, although the equation was fallacious. Success also depended upon the willingness to violate a sacred college norm, by reaching beyond the institution for support— whether from a lawyer, a reporter, or a Jewish defense organization. That enabled us to transcend our internal weakness as a tiny minority and to negotiate with college authorities with the assurance, so comforting to us and disturbing to them, that a concerned Jewish community was attentive to Wellesley issues. Nothing enraged college authorities more than our encouragement of outside scrutiny; but nothing made them respond with greater alacrity. Within the faculty, it was only necessary to remain unyielding on our bedrock principles— explicit acknowledgment and condemnation of anti-Semitism. Given the deep aversion of our opponents to prolonged and divisive conflict, the longer we stood firm the closer their commitment to conflict-avoidance brought them to our position.

In the end, it is "our" Jewish problem, not Wellesley's, that is most troubling. Yet it is within our power to resolve, for its remedies are entirely internal. A cure does not require demeaning pleas for institutional tolerance of our presence. We can, however, affirm our own self-respect as Jews by demanding the respect of others, not on their terms but on ours. ●

Wellesley cuts tie to anti-semitic past

Richard J. Israel

It is no secret that Wellesley College, like most of the private colleges in New England, has denominational Christian origins and also no secret that like most of the private colleges in New England, it became very nervous about the

RICHARD ISRAEL, a rabbi, directs the Hillel Council of Greater Boston.