



JEWISH COMMENTARY

Hamilton, Barnard, and the Ominous Decree of 2021

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IN SEPTEMBER, a bureaucrat at Barnard College, the sister institution of Columbia University, declared the millennia-old religious requirements of Judaism null and void. To understand the exquisite irony of her announcement, we must first review the origins of this academic institution.

After the American Revolution, a New Yorker by the name of Alexander Hamilton returned to the city. As an alumnus of the formerly royalist institution called Kings College, Hamilton oversaw its transformation into Columbia. As a sign of its embrace of equality, Hamilton installed on Columbia's Board of Regents the spiritual leader of New York's Jewish community, Gershom Mendes Seixas. The historian Andrew Porwancher describes in his fascinating new book about Hamilton how the Founding Father built his legal career in New York representing the members of Seixas's congregation at a time when others might have been reluctant to do so. Considering the quotas that were yet to come at America's elite schools, Hamilton's embrace of Jews at Columbia was remarkable: "In a young country caught between egalitarian promises and enduring prejudices, Hamilton's reforms at his alma mater demonstrate his commitment to the revo-

lutionary ideal of equality," Porwancher writes in *The Jewish World of Alexander Hamilton*.

The installation of Seixas at Columbia went hand in hand with a flourishing of fascination in the Hebrew Bible at the school and in America. The Columbia University seal featured the Tetragrammaton, the sacred biblical name of God, written in Hebrew letters, emitting rays of light, expressing that it was from Scripture that true enlightenment could be found. The creation of the Hebraic seal set the stage for a Hebrew address at commencement, delivered by a Jewish student and composed by Seixas.

Columbia's beginnings reflected the bond between America and the Hebrew Bible and part of why the nascent nation was so welcoming to Jews. Thus, George Washington wrote to America's Jews: "May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian Oppressors planted them in the promised land—whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation—still continue to water them with the dews of Heaven and to make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah."

We can now fast-forward to our own year and to the advent of the High Holidays at Barnard College, a women's school under the larger umbrella of Columbia. Cynthia Yang, a deputy chief of staff to Barnard's

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president and part of its “pandemic response team,” sent an email to students known to be Orthodox Jews. She informed them that “there are policies and procedures that you must follow relating to the College’s pandemic response.” Yang was referring to the regulations requiring students to check in online daily to report symptoms and whether they had come into contact with a student who had tested positive. The Orthodox students at Barnard followed these rules, like all the others. But on the Sabbath and during the High Holy Days, creative activity, or *melakha*, is forbidden. And according to normative rabbinic law, using different forms of technology is considered prohibited. Yang apparently understood that this might have presented a problem to Orthodox Jews, but she breezily informed the students that their own beliefs were immaterial:

We recognize that how you have practiced religious traditions in the past may not align with the use of technology during the high holy days or the Sabbath, but this year it is paramount for the community’s health and safety (as well as your own) that you abide by the Barnard pledge and follow the College’s policies and procedures. The campus communities that intersect at Barnard and Columbia cannot wait until Wednesday night for students to report symptoms or respond to a notification of a positive test. The chain of transmission can only be shortened when individuals act responsively and quickly.

Jewish law asserts that the Sabbath laws are overriden for the preservation of life. But in this case, the entire student body was already vaccinated, and the university was already relying on students to quarantine in case of experiencing symptoms. Moreover, the email was summarily sent out several hours before the beginning of Rosh Hashanah, without any attempt to find a different method for the students to continue communicating with the administration.

Yang’s email is remarkable, and revealing, because it betrays her own opinion of Jewish traditional faith. For Orthodox Jews, the Sabbath laws, like the rest of the Torah, are kept first and foremost because we are *commanded* to keep them, because we *must* keep them. But not for Yang; that these “traditions” were anything other than cultural curiosities, easily discarded at her command, seems never to have occurred to her.

Her email further reflects the fact that in an institution purportedly committed to multiculturalism, the faith of Jewish students is unworthy of equal respect. Would Yang have considered composing such

a nonchalant note to other ethnic or religious groups on the Barnard and Columbia campuses? The answer is obvious; indeed, it is likely that in this parallel case, Yang’s job would have been in danger.

Thus the terrible irony emerges. A school whose roots lie in the celebration of the Hebrew Bible, and the embrace of traditional Jews, suddenly embodies the opposite ethos. In the age of intersectionality, it is specifically traditional Jews whose difference Yang considered unworthy of celebration and protection.

Others at Barnard understood that Yang had committed a gaffe, and soon after the issuance of her edict, an apology arrived in the inbox of Barnard’s Orthodox Jews. Her original email, Yang reflected in a terrible understatement, “was written in haste with the goal to keep everyone as safe as possible during the high holy days and it, regrettably, was not considerate in the way it should have been of each students’ ability to practice and observe their religion how they choose.” A Sabbath-friendly solution was easily found in consultation with an Orthodox rabbi on campus, involving the placing of special stickers on student doors in the dormitory.

But it is impossible to avoid the feeling that, as a reflection of the ethos of the academic elite, Yang’s note provides an ominous omen. Jews encountered a unique embrace in America because of its love of the Hebrew Bible. A society suddenly hostile to biblical faith will become an entirely different America for adherents of Judaism.

In uptown Manhattan today, the students of Columbia and Barnard can be seen entering the magnificent Low Library on campus, completed in 1897. On the foyer floor of the library is emblazoned that Columbia seal, complete with the biblical Tetragrammaton. This accoutrement was surely intended to honor the origins of Columbia, but traditional Jews have long noted the sad fact that over the decades students at the school would traipse into the library and unintentionally tread on the name of God, once celebrated by Columbia’s creators as a symbol of the most sublime source of wisdom. But this now painfully and perfectly provides a metaphor for the fact that many of those overseeing the most celebrated schools in America no longer see traditional faith as essential to the pursuit of knowledge and consider biblical belief a curiosity at best—and a menace at worst.

The Orthodox students at Barnard were able, in the end, to fully observe Sabbath and holidays, and thank God for that. But as American higher education continues to embrace and enforce the progressive zeitgeist, it may well be that the email of Cynthia Yang was a harbinger of what is yet to come. 📧➡️