

Brotherhood

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Cancel the Rabbi's Lecture!

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My commuter plane passed low over miles of flat, evenly laid out fields stretching on endlessly as far as the eye could see. This was Nebraska, the real Midwest, the old home of the American Nazi Party. I wondered what the next thirty-six hours held in store.

"Hi, I'm Ralph Neall," a trim scholarly looking man at the airport announced. We became friends at once. Professor Neall teaches Bible and the Ancient World at Union College in Lincoln, where I was scheduled to speak. He explained that his college arose from a merger of several Seventh Day Adventist institutions of higher learning, and now was the leading institution of its type in the Midwest. Today, the college trains students for both secular and ministerial careers and stands open to Adventists and non-Adventists alike.

Union's guest room lay waiting for me when we arrived at the campus — and so did a guest. "My name is Ahmad," he announced, "May I speak with you?" I invited him in.

Ahmad calls himself a Palestinian.

Actually, he was born in Saudi Arabia, but his parents came from Haifa. He would like to return there. He is majoring in business. Why did he choose Union College? "I like Lincoln and I like small schools," he explained. "Nobody bothers me here about my religion." Since Union's cafeteria is vegetarian, in conformity with Adventist practice, Ahmad, as a Muslim, has no dietary problems.

"Are you going to speak about Israel?" Ahmad finally blurted out. I learned that he and several fellow students had petitioned the college administration either to cancel my appearance, or to invite a Palestinian spokesman to speak at the same time.

Ahmad did not see this demand as being anti-Jewish. Forgetting that Judaism is a civilization with a culture 3500 years old, he just assumed that any Jewish speaker must, by definition, be a "Zionist propagandist." Had he, like so many students, forgotten what scholarship and academic freedom are all about?

I did not want Ahmad to mistake my personal views. So I let him know that I support Israel, and I consider its existence essential not only to Jews, but to the whole free world. These are my views I said, and he was entitled to his own. As for my lectures, I had been invited to Union as a Jewish historian specializing in American Jewish histo-

ry; that was what I would lecture about. I invited him to attend.

Ahmad, I could see, remained unconvinced. My distinction between scholarship and politics was lost on him. Still, he remained polite and outwardly friendly.

Ahmad knew that I had another appointment and rose to leave. We shook hands and I wished him well. Whether he attended any of my lectures, I do not know. But word of our conversation got around. Some apologized; others looked uncomfortable. All the rest of the questions that I fielded during my stay in Lincoln dealt with more traditional areas of Jewish-Christian concern; everything from Biblical interpretations to contemporary Jewish practices.

I delivered three lectures: on "Continuity and Discontinuity in Jewish History;" on "Jewish Bible Translations in America," and on "Understanding American Anti-Semitism." Students, faculty, and visitors from the community responded positively to all three lectures. From questions, comments and conversations, I discerned a great deal of ignorance about Jews and Judaism. Not a few people displayed confusion about Jewish tradition, Jewish history, contemporary Jewish life, and the relationship of Judaism to Christianity.

Had Union College listened to

Ahmad and his friends there would have been no hope for improvement. Judaic scholars would have been effectively barred. Questions would have remained unanswered. Ignorance would only have deepened and grown more widespread.

Happily and with the Jewish Chautauqua Society's help, a wiser course was followed.