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Sue Neuman Hochberg  
Chair  
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Board of Governors  
1 West 4<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York, NY 10012

February 4, 2022

Dear Sue,

I write to you today as an HUC-JIR ordained rabbi and alumnus, and as a former tenure-track and tenured faculty member, director of the UC-HUC Ethics Center, director of outreach for the Cincinnati campus, and dean of the Cincinnati campus. Looking back, my twenty-year tenure at HUC-JIR was a period of growth, learning, and unfolding that would alter the course of my adult life. I am deeply grateful to the College-Institute and the opportunities it afforded me, and hold the entire institution in the highest esteem.

If social media reports (including your message to rabbinic colleagues) are correct, the HUC-JIR Board now engages in a deliberative process to consider the termination of the Cincinnati campus' Rabbinical School program, and, presumably, by extension also the Pines School of Graduate Studies programs, and the conversion of the campus into an as-of-yet- undefined retreat and intensive learning center. Having invested a great deal of thought and consideration in these ideas starting with a conversation held with President Rehfeld many months ago, I ask you for your forbearance as I share some additional thoughts with you. I hope that they are helpful to you and to others as you chart the future direction of our beloved College-Institute:

1. At no time throughout the past two generations, has American Jewry needed a strong and vibrant HUC-JIR more urgently than it does now. An increasing number of religiously liberal-leaning young Jews are disaffiliating from our congregations and institutions, our movement is weakening, and strident expressions of anti-Semitism are on the rise. In addition, issues (like Israel) that would unify the liberal Jewish community a few short decades ago are now the cause controversy and division. Now is the time for HUC-JIR to strengthen its presence in our lives, to enhance the intellectual foundation of our Judaism, and to produce the leaders who would ensure the survival and growth of our brand of egalitarian, open, and courageous Judaism into the next generations. I am concerned that the closure of the College-Institute's residency programs in Cincinnati would send a message of retrenchment, reduction, and withdrawal from the Midwest and much of the South, and result in additional turmoil and disaffection. I ask you to consider how difficult it would be to "control the narrative" once the "news is out." The withdrawal of other organs of our movement from this region has been deeply felt among the hundreds of thousands of our people, and remains a source of pain. The College-Institute must not repeat this error, and signal its removal from our lives. In the troubled words of Mordecai to

WE ARE A WARM, WELCOMING SYNAGOGUE FAMILY WHERE EACH PERSON MATTERS.

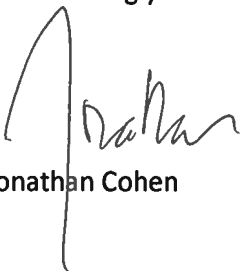
Esther 'if you remain steadfastly silent (and absent yourself or withdraw) at this time, redemption will emerge from another place.'

2. Not only does the Cincinnati campus with its Rabbinical School serve the Midwest and large parts of the South, and not only does it represent the deep connection and commitment of our movement to this region and its Jewish communities, it has also attracted some of our finest Rabbinical School students. As faculty member and as dean, I regularly heard from students (especially married students, parents, or students with a variety of other family needs) that they would not entertain the possibility of pursuing rabbinical studies in either New York or Los Angeles. The combination of the Midwestern setting, the culture of the Cincinnati campus, along with the region's relatively low cost of living attracted many of our best students. The crisis of faith that our country and its liberal Jewish communities face at this time calls for more rabbis, not fewer ones. I am deeply aware of the challenge of recruitment at this time. However, the current malaise will end, and the tide of interest in Jewish leadership will turn. The College-Institute must and can commit to the increase its recruitment of future rabbis, scholars, and teachers and educational administrators. The closing of the Rabbinical School in Cincinnati would diminish this recruitment effort and reduce the options available to potential students. In addition, it may well open the door to the formation of a new seminary or the rise to prominence of an existing institution that would compete with the College-Institute, especially in the Midwest.
3. I was appointed dean of the Cincinnati campus by President Ellenson in 2011. Within five years, the Cincinnati campus raised approximately \$1,300,000 per year more than it had when I entered the position. During my tenure, the campus grew, its deferred maintenance liability declined, its student numbers grew, and its reliance on the unrestricted budget declined. During these years, I traveled throughout the Midwest and the South extensively, visiting our congregations and colleagues, and raising awareness of and resources for the College-Institute. If I learned anything, it was that Greater Cincinnati and the entire region were blessed with both Jews and non-Jews who knew about the College-Institute, took pride in the first Jewish seminary site in the Western hemisphere, and were eager to support it. At the time, the cost of running the campus excluding the Klau Library and Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives (AJA) to the unrestricted budget was approximately \$4.5 million dollars per year. I argued then and would continue to argue today that a vibrant Cincinnati campus with its schools and programs intact, growing, evolving, and innovating is capable of raising much more money, and further contributing to the whole of the College-Institute. Incidentally, my fundraising efforts benefited the campus as a whole, including and especially the Klau Library. My experience as both dean and now rabbi indicates that the fundraising potential in the region far exceeds the needs of the College-Institute. In this regard, I must mention that the interfaith mission of the Pines School of Graduate Studies, first envisioned by President Nelson Glueck in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, has been a source of both great pride as well as good will and support among Jews and non-Jews alike. In my view, the relocation of the Rabbinical School and Pines School of Graduate Studies would significantly diminish the College-Institute's ability to raise money throughout the region. On the other hand, the immediate savings achieved would pale in comparison with the loss of fundraising potential, nor will they resolve the budgetary strains the institution has been facing.
4. Throughout the College-Institute's nearly 150 year history, it has been distinguished by the drive to build and enhance its academic resources, library, archival and museum holdings, enabling it to become a universally recognized center of Jewish learning and research, a true intellectual center. At the most difficult times, including the Great Depression, the College-Institute continued to invest in its academic resources, doggedly growing them and enhancing its stature.

The Klau Library, the AJA, the Skirball Museum, and HUC Press set the College-Institute apart from most other seminaries and yeshivas, and place it in a "different league." Sadly, throughout the past four decades or so, the College-Institute was never able to utilize properly the extraordinary resources at its disposal to enhance the academic experience of the majority of its students. I believe that the complete separation of these world-renowned and respected resources from residential academic programs would be damaging to the unique reputation, credibility, and standing of the College-Institute. It would certainly diminish its attraction in the eyes of potential faculty members, reducing the College-Institute's capacity to attract the best and brightest instructors for our future leaders. Further, instead of moving toward the resolution of a long-standing challenge to our learning programs, it would further exacerbate it. In addition, it would project the weakness of the institution and movement and enhance competition between the College-Institute and the increasing number of other seminaries, including "start-up" and online ventures that are "unencumbered" by academic resources and facilities. Most significantly, the damage caused to our flagship academic resources would be very difficult to reverse.

Please know that I am deeply committed to and grateful for the College Institute, and that I am sorry to learn of the many and serious challenges it faces. I know the burdens of such challenges. I wish you, President Rehfeld, as well as members of the Board, determination and strengthen your hands as you lead this precious and vital institution to us through the uncertainties of our time. Like so many other institutions that shape our lives (and like other HUC-JIR campuses,) the Cincinnati campus is not and never was perfect. Yet, as the first locus and now part of a whole College-Institute, its ongoing and potential contribution to the rabbinate and to scholarship represent an ideal and potential that should not be discarded or diminished. Once undermined, these would be very difficult to reconstruct. Do not lose courage and faith – *hizku ve-imtzu*. I urge you to resist the call of timidity and over-caution, and not to give way to the sense that the fundraising prospects of the College-Institute are poor. They are not. Our people are the most affluent and generous Jews who have ever inhabited this earth, and we can and should solicit the good will and friendship of so many non-Jews who see the value of our work and would deeply appreciate the opportunity to support us. I urge you to resist the urge to consolidate, cut, and withdraw at a time when the College-Institute's presence in the South and Midwest is so crucially important. I urge you to resist the lure of seemingly innovative and attractive modalities of learning that diminish the value of carefully, strategically, and gradually collected and grown academic resources. They cannot be replaced, and their value is a *keren kayemet* – a solid and lasting foundation for excellence. May your leadership grow, may you succeed, and may your achievements strengthen us, our brand of Judaism, as well as its contribution to the world we now know, the world we have yet to know, and the world we shall one day leave behind to the generations to come.

I hope you know that you may reach out to me at any time, and that I look forward to speaking with you and assisting you in any way that I can. With all good wishes, I am

  
Jonathan Cohen

- *Sechiv leme regards to you and  
yours,*