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THE EMOTIONAL RANGE OF RABBI LAMM'S SERMONS

Derashot LeDorot, 5 volumes (Maggid Books, 2012-2014) & Other Sermons

As a *darshan*, Rabbi Norman Lamm's sermons have been described as "passionate pulpit pedagogy" filled with "brilliant biblical insight, and steadfast communal commitment" on subjects as diverse and challenging as "war, political upheaval, social unrest, and rapidly developing technology."¹ He addressed current events, societal trends, and the specific needs of his congregation contextualized within the Torah portion of the week, captured now in several important published collections, most notably the *Derashot LeDorot* series and Yeshiva University's new online Lamm Heritage Archive. Yet more than offer people a spiritual lens through which to view world occurrences and communal developments, R. Lamm helped his audiences access a world of emotions, from the primal terror of facing one's mortality² to the joys of unfolding gratitude.³

The emotional depth of his writing became apparent to me many years ago while preparing a class for Tisha B'Av. I was reviewing the many verses in *Eikha* that mention crying. Do these references signal different types of tears or did Jeremiah simply regard all of them as the same salty drops of despair? There must be more to this aspect of the human condition, so primal and painful. Who else might have written on crying? Just a few words in the search engine conjured a typescript sermon by R. Lamm, replete with pencil marks and marginalia where he substituted a word or corrected a typo. That day, I received the gift not only of his thoughts but also of his iterative process. I read it with wonder. His diagnosis was profound and moving, challenging and demanding—a master class in sophisticated exegesis that expressed serious fidelity to the textual tradition with a pedagogue's gift for finding modern relevance in ancient wisdom. While reading it, I heard R. Lamm's distinctive high-pitched, fatherly voice that contained love, gentle chastisement, and expectation.

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“Ours is an age which has forgotten how to cry,” wrote R. Lamm in his Rosh Hashana sermon, “Three Who Cried,” given at The Jewish Center in New York City on September 29, 1962.⁴ He recalled the time when every *mahzor* would be stained with tears but sadly confessed that in his tenure in the rabbinate the pages of the High Holiday prayerbook were instead “so white and clean—and cold.”

In this sermon, R. Lamm reminded his congregants that people do cry less nowadays not because there is less to cry about. Those living in the immediate decades after the Holocaust understood better than most that there is perhaps more to cry about than at any other time in history and that people of all ages “have their private woes, their secret sorrows.” But he worried that the generation he was speaking to spent more time probing the heavens and less time probing the human heart. His was a generation that had lost the capacity to cry.

[We] have embarrassed ourselves into silence. It has become a style of the times to restrain our tears on the theory that maybe that way the pain will go away, that by refusing to display genuine emotion, the agonizing facts of our lives will be altered. But we are, nevertheless, human beings. And so the unwept tears and unexpressed emotions and unarticulated cries well up within us and seek release. What insight the Kotzker Rebbe had when he said that when a man needs to cry and wants to cry but cannot cry, that is the most heart-rending cry of all.

R. Lamm then majestically wove this grim plaque of emotional constriction into his characterization of three biblical examples of weeping with the objection of teaching his audience how to cry again: the mother of Sisera, Hagar, and the matriarch Rachel.

The mother of Sisera, who anxiously waited by the window for her son’s return from war, exemplifies a delusional confidence. Hers is an immoral optimism, one that would soon be shattered by the news of her son’s death. “How pitiful the tears that are so futilely shed when, later, there is divorce, and incurable illness, and a child gone astray. Broken homes, broken bodies, broken hearts—all in the inglorious tradition of Sisera’s mother.” Sent out with Ishmael from Abraham’s house, Hagar wandered and her water dried up so she placed poor Ishmael near a bush and wept: “She raised her voice and cried” (Gen. 21:16). An angel chastised her; Hagar opened her eyes and saw a well. The angel did not create the well. The spring of water was there the entire time, but in her anguish, Hagar failed to see a solution right before her eyes. “No attempt to save

the child, no looking for an oasis—which factually was there, before her eyes—no real effort at changing her dangerous situation. She merely raises her voice and cries; it is the cry of desperation, a morbid, fatalistic pessimism. Hers is a ‘realism’ that leads to resignation.” Tears that do no more than bemoan our difficulties or encourage us to surrender to what is unacceptable, rob us of the free will and agency to change a difficult situation.

R. Lamm then turned his attention to Rachel’s hard and brief life, yet “she refuses to submit, she refuses to adjust, she refuses to accept exile and destruction as the last word. Her cry, her tears, and her protest to God are the characteristic of the Jew throughout all time.” R. Lamm offered us worthy tears, the kind that recognize bitterness and express it on the way to transforming it. “They are not the tears of vain sentiment and self-pity, but of powerful protest; they are a sign not of weakness, but of strength; not of resignation or frustration, but of determination.”

Characteristic of a R. Lamm sermon, he harnessed the moment of inspiration to conclude with a practical charge: to cry the tears of determination that would lead to change. He unapologetically asked his congregants to attend synagogue more regularly, to send children to day school or at least Hebrew school, and to invest in Torah study.

R. Lamm’s interest in the power of tears was evident in an earlier sermon, delivered on Lag B’Omer 1960, titled “When Rabbi Simeon Wept” about the dramatic death of R. Shimon bar Yohai, who prepared to depart from the world by bidding farewell to friends and disciples. In this enigmatic Talmudic passage, R. Shimon saw a full house before him and began to weep uncontrollably at the sight of a tearful and anxious crowd.⁵ R. Shimon recalled an earlier time when he was ill and on death’s door. At that time, he had only one visitor, his father-in-law, R. Pinhas ben Yair. “When he came to see me, a great fire enveloped him right in front of me and that fire never left him.” But, R. Shimon said tearfully, “Now the room is full, but the fire is gone.” From this, R. Lamm concluded, “It is more important to concentrate upon a few people who will be genuine than upon the many who will remain superficial.”

Five years earlier, R. Lamm delivered a sermon on the tearful yet strange encounter between Joseph and Jacob in Egypt. Joseph cried, fell on his father’s neck and embraced him, but, according to the rabbis in the Talmud, Jacob did not reciprocate. He was reciting the *Shema*.⁶ Could this same paterfamilias encounter his son alive and pray instead of participating in this relational and emotional moment? He turned this curious rabbinic reading on its head. “[T]here comes a time when just kissing or embracing or praising or even crying hysterically is simply insufficient to

express the heights and depths and intensity and loftiness of one's feelings." R. Lamm explains, "that is not the way a Jew expresses his Simchah. The way a Jew expresses this inexpressible sensation of joy, is through Torah."

The tears in these three sermons reflect a *darshan* with a broad emotional range, one who could be both lighter and darker than those who listened to him so that he could move them to action and attention. This expressive scope was captured by his grandson, R. Ari Lamm, when eulogizing his grandfather as, "A convivial person who drew friends.... He gloried in companionship, in seeking out others and bringing them into his inner life." Lamm describes his grandfather as a man full of laughter and deeply interested in people: their drives, their hungers, their losses and the way they experienced the most joyful and shattering aspects of being human through the prism of the Torah.

The sermon was often the best genre and medium for expressing R. Lamm's Torah. Not everyone, however, prizes the sermon as an artful instrument for the evolving religious personality. To that end, R. Lamm wrote an article called, "Notes of an Unrepentant Darshan," complaining that homiletics had fallen into disfavor, upended by the casuistry and sophistication of a *shiur*.⁷ Where the sermon used to be a "respectable discipline with its own skills and traditions and methodology," it became underestimated for its pedagogic and spiritual merit. In making a case for the sermon's rehabilitation as a rabbinic craft, R. Lamm put the blame squarely on those who deliver the sermons rather than on this form of spiritual pedagogy: "It was the *darshanim*, not *derush* that failed."

R. Lamm shared the magic of listening and learning from his own rabbinic mentors who charmed and moved their audiences with meaningful interpretations of texts because they understood their respective audiences. He understood that it could be burdensome to learn, read, organize, synthesize, and write—all demands of the successful *darshan*. "And the burden of being fresh and original every week is beyond the powers of most mortals." When he wrote this article, he feared that deep substance was seen at odds with homiletic talents. "What is regrettable is the feeling that one is forced to make a choice, that the two are incompatible." The incompatibility he referenced is one I experienced personally and one that R. Lamm helped me to reconcile.

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My first impressions of R. Lamm came from reading his essays in *TRADITION* that dealt with issues of the day, deeply sourced in a gamut of Jewish texts, biblical and rabbinic. I was a college student who had read

most of one of his books—*Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought*—at least the chapters that seemed most relevant to a nineteen year old. I assumed that his subtitle summed up, in essence, much of his scholarly output. I was not yet aware of what David Shatz calls his “rich and diversified body of work.”⁸ Of his 800 extant sermons, I had heard none nor read any. In my junior year, I had him as a professor for a semester at Stern College on Hasidic thought. He was elegant and approachable, a rare combination. Puzzled by his course topic, I was too young and single-minded to understand the importance of Hasidut in both forming a comprehensive understanding of Jewish history and shaping a spiritual life. Why would the president of Yeshiva University be interested in Hasidic thought?

I did not fully understand then R. Lamm’s complex religious mindset or his courage to address difficult issues of faith and modernity with his daunting and enviable linguistic arsenal. I saw him as the head of a venerable educational institution that seemed at times beset by an identity complex. This was highlighted at a YU Purim *shpiel* that featured a R. Lamm imposter playing *Wheel of Fortune*. The white boxes had two words and the following consonants T_R_H_M_DD_ with the vowels awaiting the contestants’ guesses. This fake R. Lamm just couldn’t figure it out. The joke reflected a new campaign of the University to articulate its understanding of *Torah Umadda* as the university slogan with a number of initiatives to amplify and deepen its reach. Some years later, when I lived in Israel and was about to become a mother for the first time, my husband gave me the gift of R. Lamm’s new book *Torah Umadda*. At one point, I read a chapter lying down with the book stretched across my stomach. Suddenly, the book moved, and I felt my baby kick for the first time. Ah, I thought, surely this is a sign. Perhaps this baby will blend Judaism with the best of world culture, literature, and science.

The book offered a clear distillation and categorization of six approaches to the melding of these often disparate universes, but did not sufficiently reflect my lived experience as a student or my nascent struggles as a teacher. In December 1992, I wrote to R. Lamm with my grievances, “Because I am an avid reader of your writings and find myself quoting your articles and books in my own classes quite often, I feel that in a certain respect I know you quite well. And that is the reason for this letter. Not only to thank you for providing me with some excellent teaching material and food for thought but also perhaps I can now have the ‘conversation’ with you that I never had.”

It was arrogant to think I knew anything about R. Lamm simply as a reader or as his student for a semester, and it was certainly a *chutzpa* for me to write. I shared with him my struggles with the demands of integration

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required by *Torah Umadda* and how it seemed that the two were often at odds in the university. “I justified the duality by telling myself that we were not in high school anymore, and that the job of integration was my responsibility alone and that I should be mature and educated enough to create a religious *weltanschauung* for myself.” (Yes, I actually used that word and now read this with embarrassment.) R. Lamm confessed that as a student 50 years earlier the void in his own education “was the lack of a cohesive halakhic and philosophical theory of *Torah Umadda*” and that many of his fellow students “shared the same complaint.”⁹ Since it seemed few could translate his theories into sound and consistent educational practice, would he consider writing a second volume that would elucidate how to translate his theoretical abstractions into more practical wisdom?¹⁰

R. Lamm responded to my letter immediately with two pages of his own, informing me that he had carefully read what I wrote and was flattered that his work and ideas were being taken seriously. He had shown it to others and shared my “obvious pain and frustration.” He also suggested kindly that I may have “overstated the case here and there.” How right he was.

Many students who left day school and abandoned halakhic observance were not the products of a poorly integrated Jewish and general education but rather experienced “an inadequate education and a home life devoid of *yirat shamayim*.” He was concerned that the “inordinate and extravagant passion for getting students in ever larger numbers into the Ivy League schools” eclipsed preparing them for a more integrated and meaningful Torah life. He also bemoaned the fact that there have been “a lack of sufficient *rebbeim* committed to *Torah Umadda*” and that true integration cannot be “nurtured only from the *Madda* side.”

R. Lamm was characteristically optimistic about the future of *Torah Umadda* but unwilling to write a second volume with more practical recommendations:

I agree with you about the need for a book for the religiously educated, what you refer to as a “sequel” to my *Torah Umadda*, vol. 1. Unfortunately, it is not on my literary agenda. Other volumes are already in process and, believe me, my time for leisurely cogitation and literary work is severely limited. I shall probably have to leave this daunting task for younger colleagues.

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Many years later, when I read and re-read R. Lamm’s sermon “Three Who Cried,” I returned to this correspondence and understood my mistake. *Torah Umadda* is not really the primary work of a Jewish university,

although it provides an excellent foundation in both those arenas. It is also not the work of an individual struggling to figure out how to integrate and make sense of two worlds sometimes aligned but often misaligned. It is not even satisfied by the many outstanding articles of Jewish thought given out my first week at Yeshiva University in a Xeroxed anthology then called the *Torah Umadda Reader*. It is nourished and nurtured by the power and frequency of brilliant and moving sermons. Rabbis and educators who harness the Torah to help people live in the complicated contemporary world inspire their congregants to go beyond the mere intellectual cognition of events. They don't only analyze Torah texts. They empower people to feel their import and weight deep in their bones. They help listeners understand and experience a moment fully, spiritually, and profoundly. I was looking for wisdom in all the wrong places. The sermon is an artform and very possibly the most compelling way to communicate a lived and integrated *Torah Umadda* worldview. "Three Who Cried" allowed me to finally understand R. Lamm's true genius, his emotional sensitivity and his humanity. I finally realized that *Torah Umadda* can only succeed ideologically if it can compel emotionally.

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More recently, I served as the Community Scholar for The Jewish Center, spending several *Shabbatot* a year with that extraordinary congregation where R. Lamm had delivered these groundbreaking sermons years earlier. Each time I walked up the crimson carpeted steps to the pulpit from which he had preached, I felt the heavy knot of imposter syndrome. I was dwarfed by the task, humbled and undeserving of standing in the place where so many remarkable *darshanim* stood before, knowing that their words were matchless. Long hours were invested in thinking about the right text for a particular moment, the right story to make the text come alive, the important first sentence, the balance of general literature with rabbinic interpretation, the distance to the women's galleries that flanked the central pews. I ruminated on the congregation present, those sitting in the shul's narrow wooden seats, and those whose names grace the walls in bronze, lit annually to mark a *yahrzeit*. They, too, live in the sanctuary's hallowed space and must be remembered.

In those years, R. Lamm was an esteemed and beloved congregant of the synagogue where he once served as its esteemed and beloved rabbi. I was always grateful to see him and wish him a Shabbat Shalom before he was whisked away in his wheelchair. His hearing was poor; when, on occasion, he told me he enjoyed my remarks, I assumed he was just being

polite. He seemed smaller in that chair. He was smaller. But still dignified, always dignified, and so large in my admiration. And sometimes, I had to turn away in those moments, so that he could not see my tears.

¹ See Stuart W. Halpern, “Editor’s Preface” to *Derashot LeDorot: A Commentary for the Ages – Genesis* (Maggid Books, 2012), xiii.

² See, for example, “The View from the Brink,” *Derashot LeDorot* on Genesis, 119–124, that discusses the fear of aging, the Cuba missile crisis, and the relationship of Isaac and Esau. R. Lamm concludes, “Our world will never be the same. During our lifetime, we shall have to live with that terror constantly” (123).

³ In his sermon, “Thank Heaven,” R. Lamm used a Jacob story as a platform to navigate the complexities of gratitude: “Thanksgiving can be understood as courtesy or as conscience; as social gesture or as sacred grace; as a way of talking or as a state of the soul; as an aspect of personality or as a part of character,” *Derashot LeDorot* on Genesis, 42.

⁴ Reproduced in *Festivals of Faith: Reflections on the Jewish Holiday* (Maggid, 2011), 26–31.

⁵ *Zohar, Idra Zuta* (*Ha’azinu* 287b).

⁶ R. Samson Raphael Hirsch offers the closest reading to that of R. Lamm: “Joseph wept, Jacob did not weep. Joseph could still weep, Jacob was finished with weeping, he had wept enough in his life.... In the period since Joseph’s disappearance, Jacob had lived a lonely life, had not ceased weeping, his whole being was consumed in grief and mourning for Joseph. In the meantime, Joseph has lived a life filled with changes, he had no time to give himself to the pain of separation. But his concern, felt periodically, lingered in his inner consciousness. Now as he fell around his father’s neck, in an instance the memories of twenty years of separation, and all the suppressed emotions burst forth. Jacob had become Israel. Joseph was still in crying.”

⁷ This sermon appeared in an *RCA Sermon Anthology* (1986) and reprinted in *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, 94–107. See Tzvi Sinensky’s essay elsewhere in this volume.

⁸ That this is evident but not sufficient is illustrated by Shatz in his bibliography of R. Lamm’s writings (expanded upon by Sam Dratch in the appendix to this volume).

⁹ Norman Lamm, *Torah Umadda: The Encounter of Religious Learning with Worldly Knowledge in Jewish Tradition* (Maggid, 2010), xiii.

¹⁰ R. Jonathan Sacks reviewed R. Lamm’s book, shortly after its original 1990 publication, and similarly wondered: “One question therefore reverberates throughout modern Jewish history. Why did so few spokesman of the tradition embrace some equivalent of *Torah im Derech Eretz*?” He suggested that we have a “superabundance” of *Madda* but lack a compelling justification of Torah and suggested that R. Lamm was the perfect candidate to write on this: “There is another book to be written.... It is a defense of the other half of the phrase *Torah Umadda*. There is no one who could write it better than Norman Lamm.” (This review has been adapted and appears elsewhere in this volume.)

I am grateful to R. Tzvi Sinensky for alerting me to several of R. Lamm’s other sermons that contain ruminations on crying and for his helpful editorial comments. Special thanks to Jeremy Brown for his instructive edits.