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FAMILY AND MORALITY IN TURBULENT TIMES

"Family Values and Family Breakdown: Analysis and Prescription" and Other Works on Family and Morality

In many of his sermons, lectures, and essays, R. Norman Lamm addressed issues relating to family structure, marriage, the role of women in family and marriage, and modesty. These speeches and essays convey the feeling that he felt his community was under fierce attack. These threats were experienced as a sweeping assault on the community, from the most basic elements of communal life to tradition and culture on the whole.

Indeed, the counterculture that reached its apex from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s created a sense of chaos. The social changes that it triggered were rapid and far-reaching. They began on campuses, in popular culture, in the media, and in public discourse, but did not spare the Jewish community and the Jewish family. Rabbinic writings and statements from this period reflect a leadership attempting to stand firm in the face of this social tide and its effects.

R. Lamm analyzes the social movements and the value changes that were instigated in depth: Through his words we hear about the ideological forces that acted upon people at this time. Among the trends that R. Lamm tackled were: This new ethic, the radical counterculture that rejects all restrictions, the demand for absolute freedom, extreme individualism (which finds its origins partly in Protestantism), the avant-garde culture that is condescending towards traditional society and mocks its values and the institutions that embody them, and the development of a narcissistic society where self-realization is the supreme value.

Time and again, R. Lamm mentions the different actors who were central to these social changes: Sociologists, radical theologians, Hippies, Yippies, the anthropology of Margaret Mead, the women's liberation movement, Gloria Steinem and radical feminism, militant homosexuality,

works of popular literature such as Philip Roth's novels, as well as dystopian novels like Huxley's *A Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984*.

Through R. Lamm's words we can clearly discern the counter-narratives about family that were being hurled at the community: Family is an oppressive institution; the home is a prison. Marriage is tyranny and misery; the nuclear family is too exclusive, closed, and restrictive. It denies entry to others and is hostile to the concept of community. The mouthpieces of modern culture proclaimed that the age of family had, thankfully, expired. Family had become irrelevant. Other social structures that were more inclusive and more equitable would appear in its place.

This call was not limited to mere rhetoric—some changes were also noticeable on the ground: There was a sharp rise in divorce at that time,¹ as well as the unprecedented trend of extended bachelorhood, a phenomenon that could be quantified statistically and was accompanied by descriptions of the unfettered lifestyle prevalent in singles' communities. From every direction, the impact of the centrifugal forces that sought to erode and dismantle the modern family were apparent. Relationships and marital satisfaction were no longer considered the domain of the home, the approach to the birthrate was a function of the perspective of zero population growth, which both encouraged abortions and promulgated feelings of guilt for plans to raise a family.

The attitude towards motherhood was shaped through novels written in this period that portrayed mothers as nagging, emasculating, and manipulative. Women themselves are described by R. Lamm as torn between traditional tendencies and ideas introduced by the women's liberation movement, which did not always have their best interests at heart. At this stage of its development, the feminist movement did not assign much importance to the critical role that a mother plays in the life of her children, or of children in the life of a mother, not even as part of a woman's process of self-realization.²

One may have hoped that the community, and its cohesion, would have formed a protective wall that could resist these winds of change. However, this cultural hurricane caught the community without proper means of defense. The 1950s saw mass migration of families to the suburbs. This move cut them off from their extended families and their established traditional communities. They were forced to start new communities, lacking continuity, often cut off from grandparents, with minimal roots and links to the past, while losing a significant part of their traditional knowledge and communal context. Living far from the city forced many men to commute long distances to work. In their absence, they entrusted family and communal life almost exclusively to their wives. R. Lamm

describes the status of Jewish men as especially weak. Most Jewish homes remained ethnically Jewish, with very little authentic Jewish content. In R. Lamm's words: "*Kiddush* was replaced with cocktails, the *tallit* with a tuxedo, and the *Shabbat* table with another night around the television set."³

These cultural relics have limited strength when they are detached from their life source and are no longer part of a living organism—unconnected to faith, tradition, and authentic community.

The Antithesis to Counterculture – A Transcendental Perspective

R. Lamm often spoke about the relationship between strong Jewish identity and family resilience, as well as the connection between familial happiness and solidarity, on one hand, and commitment to Judaism and Jewish survival on the other.

R. Lamm outlined the defining characteristics of the traditional family—intimacy and devotion, respect for age and authority, a clear division of roles between parents, an emphasis on restraint, self-control, and forbearance, a perpetual awareness of questions such as "What are my responsibilities?" coupled with commitment to a transcendental system that is beyond the family.

In contrast, the modern family is typically focused on self-fulfillment outside the home—of a type that often distances the one who seeks it from his familial base. It emphasizes youth and the younger generation, and it is characterized by confusion about gender roles and a perception that prohibitions and restraint suppress and impair development. The modern family is typified by an awareness of rights and the need to balance the rights of all family members, and the absence of ideological and philosophical cohesion.

The "new" family mirrors the prevalent social processes and reflects a society where the values of self-sacrifice, loyalty, self-control, and a sense of duty, were commuted into self-actualization, self-satisfaction, individual freedom, and exercise of rights.

R. Lamm makes extensive use of biblical models. He juxtaposes Roth's scorned archetype of the overprotective mother with Sarah, the matriarch who will do everything to protect her son and is affirmed by God, despite the fact that Abraham's position seems to stake the moral high ground (39).

It seems that it is specifically Hagar who is analogous to the modern distant mother, the one who is focused on protecting herself—"Let me not see the death of the child" (Genesis 21:16)—while the angel cajoles

her to hold on to him and suggests: If you develop maternal compassion, your eyes will be able to see things they could not see beforehand. He cites the episode of the wayward and rebellious son to teach about the limitations of authority and demonstrate that the child is not the parents' property, and there is no absolute authority aside from God (43).

R. Lamm repeatedly analyzed Rachel's "suicidal" words, and Jacob's angry reaction (Genesis 30:1–2), to explore different elements of the Jewish woman's identity. Almost 50 years have passed since most of these things were written. Many of R. Lamm's in-depth analyses have been integrated into our mindset and today seem rather self-evident. For example, Rabbi Isaac Arama's words, which R. Lamm often cited in the context of Jacob's harsh response to Rachel's barrenness, were not known to the general public when served up in R. Lamm's sermons, though they have become an integral part of women's education these days, to the point that citing them often seems cliché. And yet, R. Lamm's explanations of R. Arama's fifteenth-century *Akedat Yitzhak* have a special tone and are relevant to the contemporary ear:⁴

Jacob is furious that Rachel offers a decidedly non-Jewish interpretation of her femininity ("Give me children or else I die"). Both men and women have a side that reflects their responsibilities and roles in society and within the family, and on the other hand, each person exists as a human being created in God's divine image, possessing inherent worth independent of personal achievements or failures. A human being has an innate essence that is not conditional on any particular function that he or she performs. The education proffered to women must reflect this self-worth in its entirety. The balance between the two aspects (a woman as mother alongside her covenantal role as an independent creation) must be maintained with the understanding that it is different for each individual woman.

This is a typical example: R. Lamm presented an interpretation from a traditional if little-known source, which offered a way to deal with the prevalent culture of his own day. As often happens when aspects of an approach later become widely adopted, aspects of R. Lamm's presentation that do not resonate with us decades later are glaring: virtually unequivocal statements about the division of roles within the family, the assertion of innate characteristics for paternal and maternal figures, and the determination that the Jewish family is indeed paternalistic (and rightly so!). Clearly, in the intervening years, attitudes on these matters have evolved—not only regarding the authority of women and their activities outside of the home (which R. Lamm certainly encourages), but also regarding a father's extensive and healthy involvement with his children in areas that

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were formerly the exclusive domain of mothers. Many Jewish families in this generation would oppose to being described as “paternalistic” and would not hesitate to describe themselves as functioning in a “co-leadership” model, without causing any obvious psychological damage to themselves or their children.

When it comes to family, beyond the essential base of loving and close relationships, R. Lamm suggests that we should adopt two important principles: We must restore authority to the institution of the family, specifically the authoritative status of the father in the family unit, and return, men and women alike, to a conversation predicated on responsibilities and not just rights. These two principles derive their power from the root that nourishes them—commitment to a system that transcends the family, is external to it, and superior to it. The power of parental authority stems from this same transcendental source. Parents are agents of the heavenly authority—God, Torah, Judaism, and tradition.

In a lecture given to social workers, rabbis, and teachers, R. Lamm was extremely skeptical about the possibility of offering an artificial solution or transcendental substitutes for religious commitment. This must derive from spiritual commitment, and the situation in this area was

[a] terribly messy situation. It is the universal condition of man today—of man without God, of man without faith, without an awareness of transcendence, man who feels terribly endangered by the gaping existential void within him, by the threat of meaninglessness which is aggravated by ubiquitous awareness of death (51).

Redeeming the Concept of Love

When R. Lamm addresses love, the most popular “commodity” of the time period, he expresses the generation’s confusion: Why is Judaism so formalistic in these contexts? Why does it place so much emphasis on the fine details that are so technical and unfeeling? Isn’t it true that, as the Beatles sang at the same time R. Lamm was addressing the question, “All you need is love”?

The fact that love is *not* enough was known throughout the generations, but R. Lamm links the breaking of all boundaries to a synthesis of Christian antinomianism and the progressive liberalism of the new ethical order. When love prevails over any law, and clashes with it, it will ultimately conflict with all the other values that are prized by human culture. R. Lamm considers licit love, the genre of love that adds goodness and does not turn ugly and destructive, as well as the ability to preserve love

for an extended period of time, to help it survive, and prevent it from depleting itself.

Yet again, R. Lamm arrives at his recurring motif: There is a need for a transcendental point of reference. Any given couple and the wondrous love that exists between them is not the be-all and end-all of human existence.

[H]uman love, for all its eminence in life and in doctrine, does not remain the highest value of all. Judaism teaches man that he must submit his entire life and his most cherished commitments to the higher authority of God Himself. There is a love that transcends our love for parents and wife and children—and that is love for God. There is a judgment that surpasses any human judgment no matter how ethical, and that is the Divine judgment.... The law of God takes precedence over the love of man.⁵

Time and again, R. Lamm expounds upon the various sides of an issue, and concludes that it is impossible to resolve matters at this level of discussion. To arrive at social solutions that are both impactful and provide long-term resilience, it is necessary to progress to a discussion about transcendental commitment. “If as a family, as a couple, or as an individual, you do not have this perspective, I can try and offer artificial substitutes, but the truth is that I do not believe in their potency.” In one place, he concluded: “In any event, according to my own commitments, substitutes are called idols” (52).

The Concept of Tzeniut

R. Lamm’s discussion of *tzeniut* is especially enthralling.⁶ This special concept, often imperfectly translated as “modesty,” can be approached from many different angles: the value of living simply and avoiding ostentatious behavior; humility; standards of dress and how we cover our bodies; what we wear on our heads; behavioral norms between the sexes; relationships and intimacy before and after marriage; as well as singing, gazing, touching, seclusion, and more.

R. Lamm asserts that “One of the defining characteristics of the Jewish religious personality is *tzeniut*” and conducts a discussion that is entirely theological. Rather than arguing about contemporary norms of dress and relationships, he places the entire ideology in the context of transcendental aspirations. Religious awareness that recognizes the absolute supremacy and authority of the Divine is sensitive to its characteristics and seeks to be like God and imitate Him.

Tzeniut is explained as manifesting itself in three distinct realms, each of them characteristics of God:

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The first area is *kedusha*, holiness. By its very nature, holiness exists in hiddenness and obscurity, rather than in the public sphere.⁷ Even angels, who exist in a context entirely devoid of sexuality, cover themselves when they call out “Holy, holy, holy.” Man—his body and his soul—is created in the image of God, and, when he aspires towards holiness, he implicitly understands that it exists in places that are concealed, rather than revealed.

The second realm is *kavod*, dignity: “The dignity of God lies in hiddenness” (Proverbs 25:2). If a person is confident and sure about his or her own self-worth and self-respect, there is no need to brag. If you seek to preserve your needy friends’ self-respect, you give them charity in secret. Dignity, like holiness, thrives in obscurity and concealment and is damaged by exhibitionism.⁸

The third dimension is privacy. Though this concept is easily explained and demonstrated among human beings, R. Lamm devotes the bulk of his discussion to the mystical realm. Privacy is presented as the essence of that which is Divine and lofty. God reveals Himself to man, and though this intimate communication is necessary—it is the substance of the Mount Sinai experience—Godliness, by definition, will never be entirely revealed. Its essence is a secret that man cannot perceive. Despite our longing and desire to understand, God seeks to preserve His privacy. Similarly, man, as a person created in the image of God, has a secret, a mystery, a private and transcendental place that will never be fully understood. R. Lamm explains the words “walk humbly with God” (Micah 6:8), in the sense of “as He is modest, you should be modest.”

It seems that R. Lamm is saying: I could have spoken to you about norms and inches of sleeve-length, but in a world that is empty and unsettled it is possible that my words would fall on deaf ears. In its place, I propose *tzeniut* as a Divine statement, as well as humanity’s aspirations towards that which is sublime. Ultimately, even after we engage in endless social, political, and philosophical discussions, you still need boundaries and authority that lie beyond you. If you cultivate the appropriate sensitivities, perhaps you will discover that your soul pines for inspiration that exceeds the here and now. If you listen attentively, you will connect successfully to the voice that emerges from Sinai.

By predicating our personal norms, love, and family values on transcendental ethics, we confer resilience upon the family unit itself. Irrelevant as to how in love and self-sufficient this entity is (the individual, couple, or family), it does not have stability and a way of life by itself. R. Lamm said: “There is no Judaism without a Jewish people, no Jewish people without a family, and no family without a Jewish woman in charge.”⁹

The converse is true as well. The individual (despite all of his or her substantial accomplishments in the areas of self-expression, self-realization, and independence during this turbulent period), has neither stability nor resilience if not positively inclined and committed towards that which lies beyond the self: the individual towards family, the family towards community, the community towards the collective Jewish people, and all of us, as individuals and as social entities, towards the transcendental Torah, eternity, and Godliness.

On a personal note: My father, Rabbi Dr. Shmuel Yissacher Sprecher (Milon Schoner), may he live and be well, and Rabbi Norman Lamm zt"l studied Yoreh De'ah together as havrutot in the late 1940s and early 1950s ahead of their rabbinical ordination exam administered by Rabbi Soloveitchik. They also collaborated in the underground effort in the Catskills to produce Davidka mortars for the newfound Jewish State—the full story is recounted in an oral history interview conducted with R. Lamm by Toldot Yisrael (<https://youtu.be/N7GkNLZeXPU>). In 1955 my father immigrated to Israel to help found Bar-Ilan University. My entire childhood we knew about the mutual respect and admiration that he and R. Lamm shared. My father used to say: "Everything that Normie touched became gold!" This certainly included TRADITION, the journal founded by R. Lamm, and it is a great honor for me to contribute an article to this issue in R. Lamm's memory.

¹ This period saw the steepest rise in divorces of all time: From 2.2 divorces per thousand people in the early 1960s to 5.4 divorces per thousand people in the late 1970s (source: CDC Vital Statistics of the United States).

² At later stages of feminism, more complex approaches to this issue would be expressed.

³ Unless otherwise noted, quotations are drawn from the essay "Family Values and Family Breakdown: Analysis and Prescription" in *Serving the Jewish Family*, ed. G. Bubis (Ktav, 1977), 35–52; here at p. 56. See also the Passover sermon "It's Time To Go Home" (March 31, 1972).

⁴ See treatment of R. Arama's teaching in R. Lamm's *Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, 188, and his Rosh Hashana sermon, "Women's Rights and Right Women" (September 27, 1973). Though R. Arama's explanation is well known nowadays, R. Lamm's formulation is hardly trivial.

⁵ See "Love and Law," *Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, 175–183 (quote from p. 176), first published in *The Jewish Observer* (May 1969).

⁶ "Tzeniut: A Universal Concept," *Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, 190–199, originally published in *The Haham Solomon Gaon Memorial Volume*, ed. M. Angel (Sephardic House, 1997), though most of these comments appear in a sermon, "Body and Soul: Nudism as Prank and Principle," delivered on *Parashat Vayikra* (March 30, 1974), in response to the phenomenon of "streaking."

⁷ This concept is based on a principle taught by Rabbi Soloveitchik, which R. Lamm further developed and expounded upon.

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⁸ This dimension of *tzeniut* is exemplified chiefly by human examples rather than theological ones and was not included in the original 1974 sermon. There R. Lamm expounded upon another interesting point: The idea that it is possible that extreme promiscuity and exposure will not lead to *more* sensuality, but rather a type of sexual suicide, where the absence of shame ultimately uproots sexual attraction and eroticism.

⁹ “Is the Family Finished?,” sermon for *Ki Tetze* (September 8, 1973). As mentioned above, in other contexts R. Lamm strongly encourages *fathers* to be engaged and responsible in their homes, and criticizes their absence. See “Family Values and Family Breakdown,” 51; the 1973 Rosh Hashana sermon; and more.