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INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE WITH HEADS HELD HIGH

“The Jews and the Ecumenical Council,” *Jewish Life* (November–December 1963).

“The Quest for World Community,” *Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, 167–171.

True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ. Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel’s spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.¹

N*ostra Aetate* (“In Our Time”), promulgated by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965, began as part of the Pope’s 1959 call for an ecumenical council of the Catholic Church. One of its tasks was to rethink and reimagine the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Between the years of 1961 and 1965 numerous drafts on the “Jewish Question” were produced by the council until the somewhat controversial yet welcomed statement of seventeen sentences in the fourth paragraph was codified by the Pope.

During those years, representatives from the Church solicited input and invited representatives of world Jewry to attend the council and assist them in formulating a position that would help bridge the divide between the two faith groups. While all segments of Orthodox Jewry refused to

participate in the ecumenical council, it provided them with an opportunity to deliberate, consider, create, and express their positions on interreligious dialogue.²

The framework for Modern Orthodox Judaism's foray into interreligious 'dialogue' was set by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik one year prior to the church's official declaration. In his 1964 essay "Confrontation," R. Soloveitchik famously noted, "The confrontation should occur not at a theological, but at a mundane human level."³ That is, discussions with Christians around areas of mutual concern are to be pursued, whereas dialogue pertaining to theology must be avoided at all costs. It appears that R. Soloveitchik had already formulated this approach in 1960, but did not fully and clearly articulate his position until the 1964 Mid-Winter conference of the Rabbinical Council of America.⁴

One of the enduring challenges of interreligious dialogue is learning how to carefully and cogently distinguish between theological dialogue and cooperation on secular matters. For example, was Dr. Norman Lamm in violation of R. Soloveitchik's position when he presented a heavily theological lecture in 1972 at an interreligious conference in Geneva?⁵ Since the purpose of his theological dialogue was to highlight the divide between the two faith groups, did that make it permissible? Is it even possible to separate moral and universal dialogue from theological and sacred matters?⁶

David Shatz has observed that "Dr. Lamm was also a *major* contributor to Orthodox discussion of Jewish-Christian dialogue."⁷ However, due to the gravitas of R. Soloveitchik and his personal involvement in this sensitive matter affecting world-Jewry, Dr. Lamm's voice on the topic was largely overshadowed and underappreciated. As a result, Dr. Lamm's legacy on Jewish-Christian relations has never been fully explored and analyzed.

Dr. Lamm's foundational article on the topic of interreligious dialogue appeared in the Orthodox Union's *Jewish Life* magazine.⁸ That this 1963 article shares the conclusion of R. Soloveitchik's 1964 essay leads me to suspect that there was collaboration or perhaps even an exchange of ideas between them. Dr. Lamm, anticipating ideas that would appear the following year in "Confrontation," wrote:

Today all religions must work together against the common enemy, that all-pervasive secularism which threatens us all alike. Catholics and Jews can enjoy mutual benefits in cooperating in matters of public policy on many important issues.... It would do well for Catholics to appreciate that we Jews want to speak with them about matters of mutual interest without always feeling that our souls are on the block, that any display of friendship on their part is necessarily a means to a "higher" end: Such

apprehensions inevitably inhibit free and easy relationships in mutual respect" (10, 13).

On the other hand, the manner in which Dr. Lamm eschewed the style and presentation of R. Soloveitchik's "Confrontation," is similarly worthy of our attention. In "Confrontation," one easily grasps R. Soloveitchik's intellectual prowess. He masterfully weaves through the Biblical account of creation, presenting the reader with three levels of confrontation arguing that we ought to "insist upon the indispensability of the double confrontation." That is, to remain faithful to God while committing ourselves "to the general welfare and progress of mankind" (20). From there, R. Soloveitchik sets the ground rules for confrontations between the community of the many and the community of the few. Throughout the essay, his tone is measured, reflective, and philosophic.

Dr. Lamm's article on "The Jews and the Ecumenical Council," in contrast, exudes passion, energy, and a heavy dose of *musar* for those "Jewish organizations, especially those dedicated to harmonious intergroup relations and anti-defamation as the greatest good in the universe, [who] kept their mimeograph machines working overtime" (7). Dr. Lamm was critical of the non-Orthodox and major Jewish organizations for being overly grateful to the Catholic Church for merely "considering" amending their official position on Judaism. That they were prepared to ignore thousands of years of persecution, subjugation, and bloodshed was reprehensible. "No thanks are due to a religious communion which has decided as late as 1963 to civilize its theology" (8).

Dr. Lamm also noted the curious timing in deciding to reimagine this relationship. "Let us remember that when the Catholic Church was at its most powerful, when it wielded much greater influence over the minds and destinies of men, it never even considered reducing the charge of deicide against what then were known as the 'perfidious Jews.'... It is only now, late in the day, that the Catholic Church has begun to rouse itself" (9–10). Perhaps it is best to summarize Dr. Lamm's feelings with the words written by R. Soloveitchik in an article for the Religious Zionists of America, "Instead of complaining bitterly against the Church [for approving a schema that was not as liberal as many Jews had hoped for], they [those Jews who participated in theological 'dialogue' with the Catholic Church] should say '*nostra maxima culpa*'—in plain Hebrew, *chatanu* (we have sinned) for rushing in where angels fear to tread."

Equally important, Dr. Lamm was telegraphing to Modern Orthodox Jewry that Vatican II and *Nostra Aetate* were nothing for them to get excited about nor to offer "even one iota" of gratitude. As prideful Jews,

“we must keep our heads held high” and consider that “we have no right to interfere in the conversations of Christians.” Let the Church cleanse its own soul, not ours. “The question is not: who is guilty for killing one Jew some 2,000 years ago; but who is guilty for allowing thousands upon thousands of Jews to be killed throughout the last 2,000 years?”

Whereas R. Soloveitchik spoke to the minds of the Modern Orthodox Jew, Dr. Lamm spoke to their hearts. R. Soloveitchik’s overarching goal was to present a cogent halakhic analysis of the issues, while Dr. Lamm’s goal was to provide the emotional vigor for the Jew to feel confident in defending himself from bending to the whims of the Church.¹⁰

They set out to accomplish their aims by highlighting two unique Biblical confrontations. R. Soloveitchik focused on the rendezvous between Jacob and Esau; more specifically what questions Jacob’s agents were permitted to answer Esau and which were off limits. Jacob’s guidance would be used to inform world Jewry how to dialogue with Christianity. Dr. Lamm, on the other hand, looked to the standoff between Judah and Joseph; in particular the aura of confidence that Judah evoked while standing up to the Viceroy of Egypt. “When Judah approached Joseph, whom he did not recognize as his own brother, the Torah writes, *va’yigash elov yehudah*. And the Baal ha-Turim remarks that the last letters of these three words spell *shoveh*—‘equal.’ You may be a powerful Egyptian potentate, Judah hinted to Joseph, but I am your equal. That must be our position in this confrontation; neither one of arrogance nor one of submission, but: *shoveh*” (10). In keeping with their respective themes, R. Soloveitchik’s confrontation was instructional, while Dr. Lamm’s confrontation was attitudinal.

Dr. Lamm did not only communicate this message to Modern Orthodox Jewry. Channeling his inner Judah, he pridefully took this message of caution and skepticism to Geneva in 1972, which I mentioned earlier.¹¹ He asked, “how then can Christianity achieve a genuine world community with Jews, when it desires all Jews eventually to accept Jesus?... [E]ach group must affirm that our contemporary mutual quest for world community is non-eschatological or, at worst, pre-eschatological.... Unless such self-restraint is forthcoming, and unless it is forthcoming in a manner that will inspire trust by others, the quest for world community will be bedeviled by mutual suspicion and will die while being born” (171).

Three other issues prevented Dr. Lamm from establishing warmer and kinder relations with Christianity. The first was Catholic evangelization. In *Jewish Life* magazine, Dr. Lamm took issue with “witnessing” (usually termed “missionizing”). “The Catholics have thus far not evinced

any similar tendency to abandon their missionary efforts. But how can respectful conversations be conducted in an atmosphere charged with suspicion that one partner will not be satisfied with anything less than the total surrender of the other?" (11).

Another matter which loomed large for Dr. Lamm in discussing rapprochement with Christianity was the Holocaust. In a 1967 sermon delivered at The Jewish Center, Dr. Lamm reminded his congregants, "even were dialogue otherwise possible, I do not believe it is possible for it to take place in the same century which witnessed an Auschwitz and a Buchenwald, and which was accompanied by the silence of the churches which rang loud and clear."¹² In a 1975 address to his synagogue he continued, "we must remember that 30–35 years ago there occurred the most disgraceful and horrendous episode in the history of mankind, the Holocaust. From this Holocaust, no matter what the present Pope says about his former chief, Pope Pius, the Church emerged tainted and morally compromised. Maybe Pius did help save a few individual Jews here or there. But only Heaven knows how many thousands upon thousands of Jews owe their death to his passivity and indifference. No whitewash can ever make us forget or forgive the Pope of Silence."¹³

Finally, the State of Israel figured prominently as a roadblock to normalization of relations in that same 1975 sermon. "The abhorrence of anti-Semitism by those historically guilty of it must now be expressed in the form of compensation. What compensation do I have in mind? Simply this: to affirm forthrightly the right of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel!... For the last eighteen centuries, the Church has pointed to the People of Israel as prodigals, as renegades, as deicides.... If they wish to atone for this heinous, age-old sin, then they must, once and for all, acknowledge our unquestioned right to return to that land."

Despite his willingness to engage with Christianity, Dr. Lamm took a very cautious approach to Vatican II. What was hailed around the world as a historic letter, in the eyes of Dr. Lamm, *Nostra Aetate* was nothing more than Christianity coming to terms with its own past. And for those who may have felt that *Nostra Aetate* would begin the process of thawing this solidly frozen relationship, Dr. Lamm reminded his audiences that no process of normalization could begin until the Church fully committed to stop "witnessing" to Jews in an effort to convert them to Christianity, apologized for its silence during the Holocaust, and supported the one and only Jewish State of Israel. In the unlikely scenario that the Church would make good on these issues, it would still not change Dr. Lamm's position that the conversations and dialogues between them should only revolve around matters of universal concern.

Much has changed since 1975. In 1993, formal diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel were established on the basis of the “Fundamental Accord.” The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (established in 1974) produced the historic 1998 document, “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah.” In its introduction, Pope John Paul II writes, “it is my fervent hope that the document... will indeed help heal the wounds of past misunderstandings and injustices. May it enable memory to play its necessary part in the process of shaping a future in which the unspeakable iniquity of the Shoah will never again be possible.”

Most notably, the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews issued a historic document in 2015, marking the jubilee of *Nostra Aetate* titled “The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable (Rom. 11:29): A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*” (No. 4). In it, we are told that replacement or supersession theology, defined as the classification of the Church and the Synagogue as separate entities, where the latter has been rejected, is to be dismissed without equivocation. The People of Israel were chosen through Abraham, though the Jewish consciousness of being a people came only with the Exodus and Sinai. “The Church is called the new people of God but not in the sense that the original people of God has ceased to exist.”

As to “witnessing” to the Jews: It is a very delicate matter because in Jewish eyes, it threatens the very existence of the Jewish people. “The Church is therefore obliged to view evangelization to Jews, who believe in the one God, in a different manner from that to people of other religions and worldviews,” which means that there is not to be an institutional mission to the Jews. Nonetheless, Christians must bear witness to their faith in Jesus to Jews as well, who are, like all who “have not yet received the covenant,” “aligned with the people of God of the New Covenant.”

Finally, the document sets forth goals of dialogue, most notably engaging in biblical and theological studies, combatting anti-Semitism, and pursuing justice and peace through concrete initiatives.¹⁴

In the span of 50 years, the Church condemned anti-Semitism, apologized for its silence during the Shoah, taught against mission to the Jews, exonerated the Jewish people of deicide, and recognized the State of Israel. Surely, Dr. Lamm had come to appreciate how far the relationship had evolved since those early years of skepticism in the 1960s. As Chancellor of Yeshiva University, Dr. Lamm hosted Cardinals at Yeshiva University in 2004. When pressed by the *New York Times* about the appropriateness of

such a meeting, Dr. Lamm responded, “Some would condemn me, and some would praise me, so I might as well do the right thing. There are small minds everywhere.” I imagine that Dr. Lamm was pleasantly surprised that the Catholic Church admirably addressed each one of his grievances. And yet, ever so cautious and devoted to his *rebbe*, he asserted that the meeting had adhered to R. Soloveitchik’s ruling and did not involve a discussion of theology. “We kept to his guidelines.”¹⁵

Judaism’s relationship with the Catholic Church is closer now than it has ever been in its history—and this is something for humanity to celebrate. As a leading voice in Modern Orthodox Jewry, Dr. Lamm’s understanding of the Jewish psyche instilled within our community the necessary pride and confidence to hold our heads high and engage “*shove*,” as equals, with Catholic representatives and leaders. His foresight helped craft Modern Orthodoxy’s cautious and persistent approach by insisting that the Church apologize for its past sins. Most notably, his fealty to halakha and Rabbi Soloveitchik’s guidelines demanded all this regardless of all the progress made. Despite the fact that the Church, in a very short time, has truly and meaningfully said “*batanu*,” Dr. Lamm’s legacy instructs us to always maintain our integrity and commitment to our *masora*.¹⁶

¹ “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions—*Nostra Aetate*, Proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI” (October 28, 1965).

² See, e.g., R. Moshe Feinstein, *Iggerot Moshe* Y.D. 3:43. For a thorough understanding of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s position on attending the Ecumenical Council and Vatican II, see Yigal Sklarin, “Rushing In Where Angels Fear To Tread: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, The Rabbinical Council of America, Modern Orthodox Jewry and the Second Vatican Council” *Modern Judaism* 29:3 (2009), 351–385. See also Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Community, Covenant and Commitment: Selected Letters and Communications* (Ktav, 2005), 247–252.

³ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” *TRADITION* 6:2 (1964), 24. See also, Norman Lamm’s sermon “Dialogues Overdone” for *Vayakhel* (March 4, 1967).

⁴ Sklarin, 360 and fn. 72.

⁵ Norman Lamm, “The Quest for World Community,” *Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, 167–171.

⁶ See Dr. Michael Wyschogrod, “Orthodox Judaism and Jewish-Christian Dialogue” (delivered on January 28, 1986 at the Mid-Winter Conference of the Rabbinical Council of America), available at <https://tinyurl.com/wyschograd>. (This was one of the earliest critiques of “Confrontation.”)

⁷ David Shatz, “The Writings of Rabbi Norman Lamm: A Bibliographic Essay,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 15 (2008-2009), 226. How “major” Dr. Lamm’s contribution to interreligious dialogue was is less important at this point; unpacking and appreciating his contribution, and his inimitable style in this article, is the order of the day.

⁸ Norman Lamm, “The Jews and the Ecumenical Council,” *Jewish Life* (November-December 1963). 6–13.

⁹ Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, “Schema: Statement and Analysis,” *The Jewish Horizon* 28:1 (September-October 1964), 4; reprinted in *Community, Covenant and Commitment*, 264.

¹⁰ This should not, in any way, minimize the scholarship and intellectual greatness of Dr. Lamm’s essay. My point is that his primary and stated objective was, “an attempt to assert Jewish pride and dignity” (10).

¹¹ “The Quest for World Community.”

¹² “Dialogues Overdone” for *Vayakhel* (March 4, 1967).

¹³ “The Vatican Commission and its Omission” for *Va’era* (January 11, 1975).

¹⁴ Dr. David Berger responded to this document in an unpublished paper titled “Catholic and Jewish Statements on the Fiftieth Anniversary of Nostra Aetate no. 4: Reflections of a Jewish Reader” (presented at the 24th meeting of the International Liaison Committee in Rome). A version prepared for a general audience can be found as “Vatican II at Fifty,” *Tablet Magazine* (December 15, 2015), available at www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/vatican-ii-at-50.

¹⁵ Daniel J. Wakin and Laurie Goodstein, “In Upper Manhattan, Talmudic Scholars Look Up and Find Cardinals Among the Rabbis” (January 20, 2004), B5.

¹⁶ As a member and active participant in IJCIC (the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations) I have witnessed the great friendship and partnership that has developed between our two faiths. Additionally, IJCIC has an Israeli counterpart IJCIR (Israel Jewish Council for Interreligious Relations) that dialogues with the Catholic Church. Significantly, the Holy See Commission maintains a unique relationship with the Delegations of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel.