

Dr. Novick is the Dean of the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration at Yeshiva University and holds the Raine & Stanley Silverstein Chair in Professional Ethics. A licensed psychologist, she served in various leadership capacities at Long Island Jewish Medical Center.

TIMELESS JEWISH EDUCATION: R. LAMM'S VIEWS AND VISION

Essays on Education, *Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, chapter 5.

It is not surprising that Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, who served for 27 years as the President of Yeshiva University and another thirteen years as its Chancellor, would have written with passion and eloquence about Jewish education. Equally predictable is the fact that his writings are articulate and betray a keen awareness of both the Jewish educational scene and socio-cultural trends. What is striking is how his writings, which directly related to societal pressures at play when they were composed, retain a timeless relevance for Jewish education and the Modern Orthodox world today and for the foreseeable future.

In three papers collected in volume one of *Seventy Faces: Articles of Faith* from various addresses and publications spanning almost twenty years, R. Lamm explains what he sees as the critical issues facing Jewish education, tracks their origins and relationship to societal factors of the time, and urges specific and commanding actions for both educators and the Modern Orthodox community at large. While different in their tone and focus, the papers uniformly touch upon three major areas, all of which can and should shape our thinking and our work in Jewish education: the goals and aims of Jewish education, the challenges and boons impacting Jewish education from cultural and societal trends, and the roles and responsibilities of Jewish educators.

Goals and Aims of Jewish Education

R. Lamm opens the chapter titled “*Takhlit*: Teaching for Lasting Outcomes,” based on a 1970 lecture, with the Talmud’s use of term *takhlit*

meaning “purpose” in Rava’s statement “the *takhlit* of wisdom is repentance and good deeds” (*Berakhot* 17b). Jewish education, R. Lamm makes clear, is not about mastery of a text or body of knowledge, nor is it about an accomplishment at a particular moment in time. Rather, the *takhlit* of Jewish education and the only acceptable outcome is a

commitment to Jewish action and to the sense of Jewish identity. Jewish education endeavors to produce, first, young men and women who will live their personal lives in a Jewish manner and participate fully in the affairs and concerns of the Jewish community, both locally and throughout the world. Second, and even more fundamental, it seeks to secure in them an inner sense of identity as Jews, the transformation of the student’s personality from something Jewishly *un*formed to something Jewishly *in*formed: its Judaization (225).

R. Lamm significantly expanded on this notion in the chapter on “Torah Education in the Modern Orthodox Community.”¹ In this essay, he discusses the aims of Jewish education as multifold: motivation, continuity, axiology, and *mitzvot*. Since his discussion of motivational issues relates to his consideration of cultural phenomena, motivation and culture will be considered later in this paper. As for continuity, R. Lamm uses the term not as it has come to be used in recent national polls, campaigns, and laments about the demographic future of the Jewish people. Rather, he views continuity as education that goes beyond schooling: the process of Jewish teaching and learning that creates a lifelong passion for and habit of Torah study. Elucidating the various roles of Jewish elementary schools (to teach skills and love of Torah) and secondary schools (to teach ideas and ideals), R. Lamm makes a clear case that Torah study on the college level is critical if we are to forge the habit of life-long Torah learning. This in no way minimizes the earlier components of Jewish education, which may provide the “kindling effects” described in neuropsychological research, the process by which earlier brain stimulation can impact later outcomes.² Similarly, just as education research documents the impact of rigorous high school course work on college success, early impactful Jewish learning lays the groundwork for later deepening of study.³ R. Lamm’s views are validated by anecdotal and research reports of the impact of gap-year Torah learning programs⁴ and of college settings that include strong Torah learning components versus their secular counterparts⁵ on continued learning, religious belief, and practice.

The second phenomenon R. Lamm cites as an aim of Jewish education is the axiology, or relative value we ascribe to Torah learning. He

argues that the continuity of Torah learning is dependent on how valued it is by communities, institutions, and individuals. It is only when we value something dearly that we will protect it, ensure it stays with us. A powerful advocate for *Torah u-Madda*, for excellence in both the Torah and secular realms of learning, R. Lamm's axiology is clear in his statement: "I want all of them, no matter what careers they will pursue, to keep Torah as their prime spiritual commitment, and talmud Torah as a regular and ongoing part of their lives" (250).

Torah learning continuing throughout one's life as a highly valued enterprise is not, however, sufficient, with R. Lamm emphasizing Torah *living* as critical. While this aim may be the last mentioned, it is the theme most central to his writings on education. He bemoaned the mechanistic observance he often witnessed when *berakhot* were recited with rarely "a note of genuine feeling" (251) and he challenged both schools and homes to do better. He criticizes the hypocrisy of home environments that pay lip-service to observance, but model behaviors that undermine that value. He challenges schools, even as they professionalize with the latest in pedagogic sophistication, to recognize that Jewish education and schools are "useless if they do not have *neshama*, soul" (251). As observed above, he views the *takhlit* of Jewish education as good deeds and repentance. The former is served by *mitzvot* and a life imbued with the precepts of the Torah, and the latter, here understood broadly as the transformation of personality, certainly follows such life-long lived learning.

R. Lamm understood that, despite these lofty aims of Jewish education, in the real world, students, educators, and communities are impacted by the culture and events around them. R. Lamm offered a careful and keen assessment of cultural variables at play that reveal his status as a true scholar in his time and as a powerful resource for Jewish educators for all times.

Cultural and Societal Trends: Boons and Challenges

The three chapters on Jewish education collected in *Seventy Faces* were written between 1970 and 1989. For much of that time R. Lamm served at the helm of Yeshiva University and the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. Combined with his earlier work as a professor, and over two decades in the pulpit, he was well versed in the trends within the Jewish community and those of the larger culture that impacted it. It is eerie how, while tied to the events of his day, the phenomena he carefully unpacks and considers are re-emerging today. R. Lamm had much to say about culture writ-large, but the discussions in these three chapters focus exclusively on what implications society and events of the time have on Jewish education.

As such there are two phenomena that are touched upon in these chapters of enduring relevance: the economic and related factors impacting career choice (and therefore learning choices), and the arc of counter-cultural, revolutionary thinking amongst youth and in society at large, with majority-driven trends towards universalism, liberalism, and self-focus.

R. Lamm elucidates the unfortunate economic reality of career arcs in Jewish education. As he debunks the devastating and insulting myth of “those who can, do; those who cannot, teach,” he remarks that Jewish education attracts both the best and worst: the best being those most idealistic, committed, and principled; the worst, those unsuited for pre-med, pre-law, or those with family wealth to rely on who may enter education without the ideals, passion, and commitment such a career warrants.⁶ In the challenge to attract the right people to the field, Jewish education is not alone, as the number of college students majoring in education has decreased dramatically from 1975 when education majors represented over 20% of all students, compared with a paltry 4.6% in 2017.⁷

The shortage of those entering the field is driven, R. Lamm argues, by the limited financial rewards and low status of Jewish educators, which he sees resulting from assimilationism that “considers the whole Jewish enterprise as irrelevant, and teachers therefore superfluous” (242). Zohar Raviv, lamenting the state of Jewish education agrees, suggesting that only when we “change the ways Jews perceive Judaism, present them with a positive, non-apologetic, and honest Jewishness”⁸ will Jewish education become the remarkable field it needs to be. In Erica Brown’s year of interviewing thought leaders, academics, and practitioners in the Jewish education field she uncovered similar sentiments: “Teachers... are what will make a difference in learners’ lives, and we don’t have enough people choosing the sacred profession of Jewish education”; “We don’t do enough to honor those who have already chosen education professionally:... unless we celebrate Jewish educators for the extraordinary professionals they are, who will want this career?”⁹ R. Lamm suggests the best recruiters for the field are those currently teaching and he urges “collective pride in our sacred profession” (243).

R. Lamm also bemoans educational vocationalism, what he defines as an over emphasis on the direct relevance of college studies to future earnings and profession. This deters from many areas of humanities studies, but in particular, is inconsistent with the larger aims of Jewish education, rather than professional status and economic wealth.

The second socio-cultural issue R. Lamm addresses is the impact of broad cultural movements on the *zeitgeist* of young Jewish learners. He repeatedly considers the rebelliousness of youth and trends in celebrating

counter-cultural positions as an advantage for Jewish education, arguing that a counter-cultural atmosphere works in our favor, creating openness to alternatives. He reminds us that dealing with the revolutionary stance of youth is not a new challenge and has always presented opportunities. Citing Rav Kook's teachings in the 1920s regarding young, secular, pioneering Zionists, R. Lamm suggests that if we are sympathetic listeners who can accept and appreciate the criticism of each generation's revolutionary thinking, our message will meet receptive ears. Revolutions create counter-cultural thinking that can unravel existing beliefs and structures, leaving room for Jewish education to share its central tenets. "As Western civilization, in the form we have known it, approaches its moment of truth, what we have to say, if we say it articulately and honestly, may get us a better hearing" (228).

R. Lamm discusses quite specifically the impact of African-American cultural movements and Jews. In his 1970 address to the Jewish Education Committee he celebrates the "Black revolution: as push-back against cultural pluralism and 'melting pot' ideology" (229). Jews and the Jewish experience, he understands, will always be outside the majority cultural norm and experience. While historically Jewish and African American narratives and experience are quite different, a reality the current Black Lives Matter movement makes clear, R. Lamm's thesis that the success of the African American cause, and in particular the celebration of unique Black culture, is positive for Jewish culture as well, remains compelling. He argues: "If the Black man can succeed, then Judaism will prosper that much more, because it will mean that practicing Jews will be accepted for themselves, as themselves, without having to apologize for their existence" (229).

Knowing R. Lamm's views on the aims of Jewish education and considering his erudite understanding of the cultural phenomenon that impact it, what specific directions and inspiration might he offer Jewish educators? While his discussion of their roles and responsibilities makes clear this is a profession that requires heroic efforts, his clear optimism for the endeavor of Jewish education provides powerful inspiration.

Roles and Responsibilities of Jewish Educators

R. Lamm considers not just what Jewish educators should teach, nor does he focus solely on how they should teach. His thorough understanding of Jewish education includes clear statements concerning the identity of effective educators—what they must believe and who they must be. Many of his writings hint at, if not advise outright, which content should

comprise Jewish education. Education about Israel is both critical and has been, he argues, insufficiently “exploited.” He believed that regardless of our own view of the connection between the Holocaust and the State of Israel, pedagogically they must be connected “in order for young people to understand in the depths of their being that Israel is something inefably vital to them” (229). Teaching Israel (nationalism), or Hebrew (language), or academic study of Judaism, or celebrating Judaism as a culture is insufficient on its own, as is any given piece of content knowledge. Rather, Jewish educators must “provide raw material of Torah from which students can construct their personal Jewish answers” (254). Before addressing the pedagogical implications of this last statement, one final key content area is clear in his discussion of the aim of Jewish education as “*ma’asim tovim*.” Social justice is the essence of Jewish learning and Jewish living and should not be seen, he argues, as validating popular notions of care or generosity. “Rather students must know that as Chazal say ‘the Torah bespeaks generosity and kindness from beginning to end’” (232).

Beyond what is taught, how it is taught is critical. In discussing that Jewish educators need to learn to sing *zemirot* again, R. Lamm reveals his understanding of the power of passionately delivered experiential education. It is not enough to know the lyrics and melody, Jewish educators must *feel* deeply in order to communicate fully the richness of Torah learning and living. This is especially true since, he argues, Jewish education must be a spiritual one, engaging the heart and soul of students:

[W]e in Jewish education must rid ourselves of our rationalistic prejudices and liberate ourselves of our own self-images as intellectual, misunderstood philosophers, frustrated professors. We must see ourselves again as whole human beings, as sentient beings who must speak and communicate with students not only by skills and techniques and not only through ideas, but through real, genuine experience and emotion. We must kindle the spark of Jewish feeling in ourselves.... We have got to add more drama, not dramatics.... There has got to be more *devekut*, more heart, and less inhibition and bashfulness in demonstration to our students of our own capacity for religious experience (235).

Judaism, and therefore Jewish education, is by definition a metaphysical endeavor. Comparing it to other popular self-fulfillment movements, R. Lamm explains that while Judaism does focus on man, it does so only in the sense that man stands before God. As such, Jewish education must build the self and develop self-esteem, but by recognizing that “self-fulfillment comes from self-transcendence, that finding the self is achieved

by losing the self in a great cause; the study of Torah, the life of mitzvot, Israel; concern with oppressed Jewries and the homeless and the sick and the underprivileged. The central mission of Jewish education is to fill the metaphysical void creatively and truthfully” (254).

Jewish educators face a daunting task and R. Lamm provides considerable encouragement as he discusses what successful educators must believe and who they must be. Jewish education is more than a profession defined by a set of skills and the production of results about which one remains impersonal. The passionate commitment and reverence for what and who is being taught makes Jewish education more than a job or career, but a mission. He recognizes that this will be challenging at times and requires unapologetic commitment and belief. Jewish educators must demonstrate their unwavering belief in Jewish ideas and ideals even “when it is unpopular. We must have the confidence to stick by it and know that ultimately it will prevail, even if it must go into eclipse for a while... we have got to have the elemental honesty to resist cultural pressure and oppose what we consider wrong from a Jewish point of view” (238). Teachers should not despair, even in the face of negative myths about Jewish teaching and learning, and R. Lamm urges confidence in their own abilities and in their talent in restoring faith in their students’ abilities to present Judaism as “the answer,” rather than merely an alternative. And should the Jewish educator wonder from where to find strength through the challenges, R. Lamm clarifies:

[T]he covenant between God and Israel guarantees the eternal existence of the Jewish people... so, it all boils down to faith—faith in the surpassing endurance of the sacred legacy we are commissioned to pass on; faith in the ultimate success of the enterprise of Jewish education... faith that despite all difficulties, we are determined that we shall not be defeated; that we shall counter pessimism with persistence; that the covenant continues; that *am Yisrael chai* because *od Avinu chai* and that therefore the Torah is a *Torat chayyim* (246).

Experiential, engaged education requires educators who are honest and genuine role-models of that which they teach. There is no room for going through the motions or saying one thing and doing another. R. Lamm’s focus on Jewish education as a means towards “*ma’asim tovim* and *teshuvah*” makes it clear that the personality and integrity of the Jewish educator is highly relevant. He stated emphatically: The Jewish educator must be a mission-driven, devoted teacher, but beyond what she knows as a scholar, and what he knows as a talented pedagogue, the Jewish educator “must be a complete Jew, a complete human being—a *mensch*” (244).

In these three chapters on Jewish education, and through his life's mission, R. Lamm taught us much that will have enduring relevance. Through his passionate words, we understand the challenges and the sacred opportunities of Jewish education. Reading his words, urging for the centrality of the divine, for teaching and living genuine, authentic Judaism, for a focus on our attitudes and deeds towards others as a critical Torah precept, and toward the courage and willingness to counter trends in the prevailing culture, we are both discouraged and empowered. Discouraged because so many years after his writing, we continue to struggle to get it right. Yet, in my work, where I am privileged to meet scores of passionate and committed aspiring Jewish educators every year, I am encouraged because I know that we are prepared to continue the struggle and contribute to its amelioration. Empowered, because R. Lamm has offered us the strength and inspiration, and the wisdom and tools we need to continue the work to benefit Jewish students and educators, today and for generations to come.

¹ Originally published in *Ten Da'at* (Fall 1989), adapted from a lecture at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in New York.

² John Gaito, "The Kindling Effect," *Physiological Psychology* 2 (1974), 45–50.

³ Mark C. Long, Dylan Conger, and Patrice Iatarola, "Effects of High School Course-Taking on Secondary and Postsecondary Success," *American Educational Research Journal* 49 (2012), 285–322.

⁴ Steven Eisenberg, "Spiritual and Religious Mentoring: The Role of Rabbis and Teachers as Social Supporters Amongst Jewish Modern Orthodox High School Graduates Spending a Year of Study in Israel," Ed.D. dissertation (Yeshiva University, 2010).

⁵ Jeremy Spierer, "Religious Beliefs in Emerging Adulthood: The Effects of the Freshman Year of College on Religious Beliefs in the Context of a Gap Year in Israel," Ed.D. dissertation (Yeshiva University, 2018).

⁶ This is one of the "four myths" R. Lamm elucidates in his essay of that title, which first appeared in *Jewish Education* 45 (Spring 1977) under the title "The Jewish Educator and Jewish Education: Four Myths." The four myths include: Children do not want to learn; he who can, does, he who cannot, teaches; our problem is the lack of new techniques; and we are fighting a losing battle.

⁷ Jacob Passy, "Fewer Americans are Majoring in Education, But Will Students Pay the Price?" *Market Watch* (February 14, 2018), available at marketwatch.com.

⁸ Zohar Raviv, "On Truth, Tradition, and Respect in Jewish Education," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 76 (2000), 275–291.

⁹ Erica Brown, "Reflecting and Celebrating: Conversations on Jewish Education," *eJewishPhilanthropy.com* (March 5, 2018).