

TRADITION

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Jeffrey Saks

TRADITION

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

“A MAN OF ALL SPIRITS”: EXCAVATING THE THOUGHT OF RABBI LAMM

During the dark days of COVID-19, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm *zt”l* passed away at the age of 92. Over the past year much has been said and written about R. Lamm’s life and legacy; much more will surely be added in the years and decades to come in evaluating his impact and enduring intellectual bequest. How could it be otherwise? R. Lamm possessed a complex constellation of talents and filled a bevy of roles in the life of his community. How many others could lay claim to a lasting legacy as a rabbi, preacher, and teacher; scholar and writer; public intellectual and spokesman; thinker and philosopher; university president and *rosh ha-yeshiva*; and many other roles as well?

In our desire to assess this rich and multifarious person and his thought, we have assembled the collection you are holding. The essays herein consider the monumental record of R. Lamm’s writings in fields as varied as the man himself: Classical *lomdus* and Jewish philosophy; the interface of Torah and worldly wisdom; scholarship on Hasidism and on the ideology and theology of its opponents; Modern Orthodoxy’s relationship with our brethren to the denominational right and left; faith, community, marriage and family, morality, education, the rabbinate and leadership, Israel and Zionism, and the Holocaust (and this is far from an exhaustive catalog). In the global public sphere he tackled matters of interfaith relations, and addressed the significance of Judaism’s moral and philosophical teachings for civil and Constitutional law and for contemporary science (even science fiction). His writings constitute the testament of a man teaching, preaching to, and goading his particular religious community, who also always looked outward—communicating a message to the wider world and encouraging us to do so as well. Through his writings he stimulated us to boldly fill a role in the community and the world: “Lead, for Heaven’s sake; lead *le-shem Shamayim*; and let the world know that... Torah is thriving in Israel!” he once exhorted a group of freshly ordained rabbis.

The written record excavated in this book spans many decades and various genres, from weighty yet articulate academic tomes in English and Hebrew, to expressive works aimed at broad Jewish and general audiences, which popularize but never pander. It is breathtaking to consider that these myriad and lasting scholarly achievements were accomplished while simultaneously performing with success and distinction in the demanding arenas of, first, the pulpit rabbinate in a 25 year career,

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followed by more than a quarter-century as the president of Yeshiva University. His singular model of ceaseless public activity yoked to ongoing intellectual pursuits obligates all who shirk one or the other aspect with claims to being too busy.

Towards the end of his career he looked retrospectively on his role at the helm of our religious movement and its flagship institution. He observed that when Moses prepared to pass the reins to the next generation of leadership he petitioned God to be “succeeded by someone very much like himself”:

Moses spoke to the Lord, saying, “Let the Lord, God of the spirits for all flesh, appoint someone over the community... so that the Lord’s community may not be like a shepherdless flock.” And the Lord answered Moses, “Single out Joshua son of Nun, a man possessing spirit, and lay your hand upon him” (Numbers 27:15–18).

R. Lamm remarked that Moses wished to be replaced by “a man for all seasons,”

one blessed with diverse talents—*ha-ruchot*, “spirits,” in the plural. God’s answer was clear: “Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man who possesses *ruach*”—“spirit,” in the singular. It is not necessary for a leader to have all “spirits,” all talents, all powers and potencies. It is enough if he has *ruach*, spirit—courage, passion, inspiration, resolve, determination... And *ruach*, spirit, “fire in the belly,” is a more important token of future success as a leader than *ruchot*, a bundle of talents full blown (epilogue to *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2).

How remarkable. Here was a man, almost Moses-like in his own plurality of talents, reminding those of us who would follow him that we will succeed even if we are “mere” Joshuas. In that retrospective essay (originating as a speech to the 2001 RIETS Dinner) he shows a strong but healthy self-awareness and assessment of his own talents and achievements (and, by implication, acknowledging his failures and shortcomings as well).

R. Lamm challenges us to make ideas matter. I recall he once told me something like: “Ideas can be as powerful as arrows, but they are powerless without a bow.” For what singular spirit do we need be endowed with to meet our challenges? Only courage, passion, inspiration, resolve, determination, and fire in the belly! That is all. *Ve-halevai!* It was an acknowledgement that intellectual heft, the ability to think, and speak, and write on the broad array of issues outlined above, and

dissected in the volume presented here, only gets one and his community so far.

Perhaps with the outline of these insights already in his mind, he founded *TRADITION*, and served as its first editor, with confidence that this journal, the first of its kind, would become a platform for other Orthodox writers and thinkers to generate and disseminate the types of ideas that have the potential to keep our community mentally awake and engaged. Thanks to his spirit and founding vision, *TRADITION* has always aspired to be a lens through which we engage in the best of religious thought. Above all, we have always endeavored to shape Orthodoxy's discourse, and to explore the contours of the world in which we live and the religious future we hope to shape.

Perhaps more than anyone of his generation, Norman Lamm viscerally believed in the power of thought and theory to animate action and practice. He was committed to the principle that Modern Orthodoxy would be strongest if its adherents tenaciously engaged the core ideas and philosophical foundations of our movement, and he saw his role as galvanizing his congregants, students, friends, and colleagues to join him in this endeavor—to talk, debate, argue. Throughout his long career he called upon us to wrestle in the arena of ideas in a way that would shape and inform the life of our religious community.

I think of my own arrival as a freshman, entering Yeshiva University in 1987. At that time R. Lamm had already been president for over a decade, and—timed with YU's centenary—had embarked on conducting a conversation within the university and the larger American Modern Orthodox community, organized around the concept of *Torah u-Madda*. He made that motto resonate and inspire using it as a compass point to orient a process of deliberation and a communal conversation about how to grapple with, make sense of, and organize our values around the confrontation and interaction of Judaism and Torah, on one hand, with secular studies and civilization writ large on the other. *Torah u-Madda* (and the resulting book by that name) was perhaps the grandest example of his standing at the crossroads of thought and action, philosophy and lived religious community and commitment—but it was only one example of many. I cannot exaggerate the personal importance of those ideas. To hear R. Lamm confidently proclaim, “We are no less human for our devotion to Torah; and we are no less Jewish for our commitment to worldly wisdom,” was transformative and helped create a permission structure for a young man finding his way into the world of committed Jewish life. The ongoing debate and discussion he initiated have played a significant role in shaping my life as a Jew, and as a rabbi and educator. In occupying the position he inaugurated as editor

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of *TRADITION*, I am animated on a daily basis by his model of how ideas should influence and elevate our lives as thinking religious beings. I pray that our journal continues to live up to his aspirations and ideals.

With the goal of honoring R. Lamm as a thinker, scholar, philosopher, and man of ideas, this memorial volume explores different areas of his legacy as expressed through his writing. We asked our leading educators, thinkers, writers, and scholars to engage with the array of ideas with which he challenged us decade after decade. They were each tasked with writing an essay exploring one of his books or major essays (in some cases, a set of related essays). The assignment was no mere “book review” but an attempt to assess his lasting contribution to Jewish thought through the prism of his works. The authors were asked to consider what issues motivated R. Lamm and stood on the public agenda when he wrote the piece they were assigned. Where did it fit into the scheme of Jewish life and learning in the 20th century? How is it a reflection of larger issues in his own life and thought? How were those issues and concerns reflected in other aspects of his career? What is *this* work’s enduring legacy and message for us today? The essays can be read in any order; each focuses on a discrete work or cluster of works, and the reader will uncover a web of interconnected themes, passions, and concerns in moving among the offerings. Certain works are so central that it is not surprising to see them cited again and again in very diverse contexts.

Many of our writers supplemented their analyses of R. Lamm’s written Torah by surveying the oral record left behind in the texts of his sermons and public addresses. As an orator, R. Lamm was the peerless “unrepentant *darshan*” of his generation. Thanks to the very significant resource of the Lamm Heritage Archives created by Pearl Berger and maintained at Yeshiva University (www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage), readers can access and search his many hundreds of sermon texts on the weekly *parasha*, holidays, and special occasions, along with other major speeches as well as eulogies (another genre at which he excelled). In order not to clutter the endnotes of the essays with unwieldy URLs, we indicated the titles and dates of sermons, all easily accessible through the search engine of the Lamm Archives. Exposure to R. Lamm as an orator is worthwhile for many reasons, not the least of which is that through such a medium the reader can sample almost first-hand his renowned wit, preserved for the generations. He wielded it ably as a tool to enlighten, and we should note that he never fell into the trap of substituting comedy for content. His good humor no doubt helped him manage the barbs of public acrimony he suffered in his chosen institutional and intellectual leadership roles. He noted at career’s end that he “suffered public insults,

unfair and derogatory criticism—on behalf of you, the schools and community I love and champion—from Right and from Left. I consider myself an equal opportunity target!”

It should be noted that many of this volume’s authors, especially the younger ones, were disciples and admirers of R. Lamm from afar; others shared longtime relationships with him as colleagues, congregants, or students. In some cases our authors are among the many Lamm family members who have gone on to make their own significant contributions to Jewish life and learning, and we hope that this volume adds a measure of comfort to them on the staggering double loss of R. Lamm just a few weeks after the passing of Mrs. Mindella Lamm, of blessed memories. We very deliberately eschewed the pretense of the disconnected academic voice in our writing (never fully desirable or obtainable in all cases)—these writers often telegraph to us how they have been profoundly challenged and personally inspired by R. Lamm.

In Fall 1958 the 30-year-old (!) Norman Lamm inaugurated the pages of *TRADITION* by asking:

What then do we mean by “tradition,” and why have we decided to publish a journal by that name in an age when man has broken the shackles of gravity and is on the verge of the conquest of the heavens themselves, an age which seems to have broken completely with the past which nurtured it? By “tradition” we mean neither a slavish adherence to old formulas, nor a romantic veneration of “the good old days” which strips the past of all meaningfulness for the present. In our conception of “tradition” we do not concentrate exclusively on the past at all. The word itself comes from the Latin *tradere* which means to hand down, to transmit, to bequeath. Similarly, its Hebrew equivalent *masorah* derives from the root which means “to give over.” The focus of *TRADITION* is, then, the future and not the past. “Tradition” is thus a commitment by the past to the future, the promise of roots, the precondition of a healthy continuity of that which is worthy of being preserved, the affirmation that the human predicament in general, and the Jewish situation in particular, are not frighteningly new, but that they grow out of a soil which we can know and analyze and use to great benefit.

We come after. We live in a religious world transformed by those who came before, and by their ideas and vision. We, and our children and our children’s children, are the bearers of the tradition so eloquently articulated, reasoned, and transmitted by R. Norman Lamm and others. Ours is the future to which he committed himself. May we be worthy to carry on his mission and tradition for those who will follow.

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— *Jeffrey Saks*