

Benjamin J. Samuels, Ph.D., has been rabbi of Congregation Shaarei Tefillah in Newton, MA, since 1995 and teaches widely in the Greater Boston Jewish community.

## THE RABBINATE AS CALLING AND CHALLENGE

“The Challenge of the Rabbinate” and Other Essays, *Seventy Faces*,  
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Toward the end of our Shabbat prayers we recite two evocative rabbinic teachings:

It was taught in the Academy of Elijah: Whoever studies *halakhot* (Jewish laws) each day is assured a place in the World to Come, as it says (Habbakuk 3:6): “*Halikhot olam Lo*, The ways of the world are His” – read not, “*halikhot*, ways,” but “*halakhot*, laws” (*Nidda* 73a).

Immediately following this the liturgy juxtaposes another teaching:

Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Hanina: Torah Scholars increase peace in the world, as it says (Isaiah 54:13): “And all your children (*banayikh*) shall be taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children.” Read not “*banayikh*, your children,” but “*bonayikh*, your builders” (*Berakhot* 64a).

At the 2002 *Hag ha-Semikha*, Rabbi Norman Lamm asked the celebrants: Why does this *tefilla* first teach that Jewish law must be studied daily, only to follow up with a second teaching of midrashic homily, an *aggada* about peace? Wouldn’t it have made more sense to immediately teach a halakha, thus fulfilling the edict of that very teaching?

In my mind I can hear R. Lamm’s intonation as he asks this question. I envision him standing before the newly minted *musmakhim*, scanning eager eyes with his serious countenance, then breaking into a subtle smile. “[Torah Scholars increase peace in the word] is not a descriptive-aggadic [statement],” he exclaims. “It is a normative-halakhic one; namely, it is halakhically required of scholars that they increase

## TRADITION

peace in the world! It is the preeminent *halakha* one should reiterate daily.”<sup>1</sup>

The substance and juxtaposition of these two rabbinic teachings touch upon so many topics pertinent to R. Lamm’s articulated views on the rabbinical calling, as well as the challenges of the contemporary rabbinate.<sup>2</sup> These include: a life-long commitment to daily Torah study and generative scholarship; the tension between *Torah Lishmah*—learning for its own sake, and Torah study as applied law; the rabbi as preacher, teacher, and pastor; the relationship between halakha and *aggada*, law and ethics, that is, between pristine Torah ideals and messy, complex life; Israel and the diaspora/world; and focusing on one’s own learning weighed against the need to establish the next generation of learners and leaders.

However, for me, this quintessential *derasha* captures R. Lamm’s fundamental vision of the rabbinate as a vocation of both *Ahavat ha-Torah* and *Ahavat Yisrael*—a love of Torah study and unyielding commitment to halakha, as well as the outreaching, sympathetic love for all Jews, individually and collectively. Love of Torah beckons us to the *beit midrash*; love of Israel calls upon the shepherd to follow the flock into the world’s wilderness, challenging solicitous rabbis to chart new paths of Torah, often on unfamiliar terrain. For R. Lamm, while the affirmation of these two core values inspires a profound sense of rabbinical calling, their dual actualization more than not entails pervasive challenge. Often, they stand together in fraught tension rather than unitive harmony. Love of Torah demands an orientation of truth-seeking and judgment; love of Israel requires an attitude of kindness and understanding. The truth-holding lover of Torah is a fighter; the *hesed*-gracing lover of Israel is a pursuer of peace. How then can the Torah Scholar be a builder of a world of pluralistic peace?<sup>3</sup>

R. Lamm recognized this challenge as a matter of painful personal experience: “[Torah scholars increase peace in the world] is factually questionable; I know of many cases where the exact opposite is true, where scholars foment strife—and I have the scars to prove it.”<sup>4</sup> The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks attests that R. Lamm was fond of saying that there is only one joke in the Mishna—i.e., Torah Scholars increase peace in the world.<sup>5</sup> And yet, despite R. Lamm’s occasional indulgence in cathartic cynicism, R. Elazar’s teaching in the name of R. Hanina deeply informs R. Lamm’s vision of the rabbinate and expectation of *benei Torah*. Speaking to his son Shalom on the occasion of his bar mitzva at The Jewish Center in 1972, R. Lamm expounded upon this teaching: “The greatest *binyan*, the most enduring edifice, the most sublime creativity, is that which comes from being *limudei Hashem*, ‘taught of the Lord.’ A Jew

cannot be a man, a true *ish*, unless at least part of his creativity, the major part, is expressed in creative Jewishness: as a creative *ba'al hesed*, as a creative son of Israel, as a creative *ben Torah*.”<sup>6</sup> For R. Lamm, the blessing he shared with his son as a boy arriving at the age of *mitzvot* and emerging into manhood resounds in the messages he shared at *Semikha* convocations with young men celebrating their entry into the rabbinate. The words, however, that R. Lamm spoke to rabbis, whether veterans or those at the beginning of their careers, additionally highlighted the awaiting challenges of trying to be at once both a *ben Torah* and a *ba'al hesed*, a lover of Torah and a lover of Israel.

In May 1968, R. Lamm, then 40 years old and having already served in the American rabbinate for sixteen years, almost nine years at the helm of The Jewish Center, was invited to England to speak at the Anglo-Jewish Preachers Conference held in Manchester.<sup>7</sup> It was just one year before R. Lamm would hesitatingly embrace Modern Orthodoxy as a movement by that name, of which he was shortly to become one of its primary intellectual and communal leaders, helping formulate a worldview “in a manner that is Halakhically legitimate, philosophically persuasive, religiously inspiring, and personally convincing.”<sup>8</sup> By the late 1960s, American Orthodoxy was already in ascendancy for many reasons, including: the educational and communal achievements of post-Holocaust American Jewry, especially the flourishing of the Day School movement; the nascent *ba'al teshuva* movement driven in part by the counter-cultural, ethnic pride movements of the 1960s; and the intensity of Jewish pride arising in the wake of Israel’s stunning victory in 1967’s Six-Day War.<sup>9</sup> British modern Orthodoxy did not yet enjoy equivalent vibrancy. The United Synagogue was still recovering from “the Jacobs affair” of 1964, and had recently transitioned from the tenure of Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie to the new leadership of Chief Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits, who had most recently served for eleven years as the rabbi of the Fifth Avenue Synagogue on Manhattan’s Upper East Side.<sup>10</sup> R. Lamm already enjoyed an international reputation as a communal rabbi, scholar, and *darshan*, and was invited to England to address, “The Challenges of the Modern Rabbinate.”<sup>11</sup>

R. Lamm began: “The Rabbinate today has fallen upon hard times. In the last year or two, there have appeared a number of articles announcing the imminent demise of the Rabbinate....” While no doubt the rabbinate in England at the time—and even today in America!—faced serious challenges, R. Lamm seems to be employing a rhetorical trope that I call the “near-defeated prophet.” He returns to this homiletical motif time and again in speaking to rabbis, whether veterans or newbies. R. Lamm describes a dire Jewish communal situation, enumerates its difficulties,

and then exhorts those rabbis ensnared by near-despair to be of good courage and strong resolve to rise up and meet the leadership challenges at hand, for which they have been prepared and are now uniquely suited. In the course of the exhortation, R. Lamm provides keen analysis of the problems, and offers astute strategy and wise guidance. His primary biblical paradigm for this trope of near-defeatism is the prophet Elijah, who cannot answer God's simple query: "What are you doing here?" (I Kings 19:9, 13). There are other pessimistic biblical and talmudic characters that he draws upon in his oeuvre of speeches on the rabbinate, as there are models of leadership and resilience.

To the Anglo-Jewish preachers at his address, R. Lamm goes on to outline the challenges of the modern rabbinate. He laments the internal threat posed to the venerable institution of rabbinical generalists by increasing professional specialization. *Roshei Yeshiva* have become the paramount Jewish *lamdanim* and educators; *poskim* the halakhic decisors; professors of religion and theology the doyens of Jewish thought; the rabbinical pastorate has been outsourced to psychologists, social workers, and marriage counselors; community building to fundraisers; and *hesed* to charitable organizations. "Sooner or later, the community will manage very well without [the rabbi]" (81, 89–91).

"American Jewry was a dying community until the Day School movement breathed new life into it," asserted R. Lamm. By implication, the rabbinate in England has failed its educational mission by not adequately building up a Jewish Day School system, which beyond obliged *Talmud Torah*, will guarantee the Jewish future by providing a "reservoir of *ba'alei batim*, of potential Rabbis, and religious functionaries.... Every self-respecting Rabbinical student knows that his first duty in coming to a new position is to build a Day School" (85).

Shuls, at least in America, he told his British audience, are becoming secularized. No longer exclusively places of prayer or study, they are increasingly becoming social centers. "Which shall triumph – the social hall or the sanctuary? – the parties or the prayers? – the platforms or the pulpit? – the *dinim* or the dinners? – the 'Bar' or the 'Mitzvah'?" (86).<sup>12</sup> Assimilation is on the rise, ironically even with the growth of the State of Israel, which depresses the perceived need for Diaspora Jewry to take responsibility for the Jewish future (82). Secularization and secularism prosecute a philosophical and cultural attack against Judaism and undermine traditional mores and theistic morals (86–88).

R. Lamm also spotlights the thorny "question of co-existence with non-Orthodox religious groups within the Jewish community," an "almost identical situation" faced by both English and American Orthodox

Jews. R. Lamm forcefully asserts that, “if we are indeed Orthodox, then we have commitments that we cannot in good conscience compromise in the name of sportsmanship or good fellowship or even unity.... At the same time, I refuse, without cogent reason, to read anyone out of the Jewish community” (83).

When the contemporary Orthodox rabbinate faces obstructionist lay leaders within Orthodoxy, antagonistic co-religionists from without, or Jewish professional specialists who “threaten to diminish us and emasculate our leadership and influence” (91), R. Lamm returns to the foundational, sometimes conflicting, dual obligations of *Ahavat ha-Torah* and *Ahavat Yisrael*. The primary challenge is to produce a self-confident, strong rabbinate that will empower its members to fulfill their multi-valenced rabbinical calling, while meeting the challenge to balance *emet*—the unrelenting truth of Torah, with *hesed*—loving-kindness toward all Jews.<sup>13</sup> He avers:

In Kabbalistic terms, we must strive for *hesed she-bigevura*. That should be our special pride. Let us face our tasks with *gevura*, with intellectual vigor and spiritual strength and idealistic commitment. But let us never be guilty of intolerance or belligerence. *Hesed she-bigevura* means to be aggressive, but not offensive; tough, but not rough; to act with vigor, not rigor. It demands of us courage and heroism with personal graciousness and compassion and generosity.... Let this resolve and this determination evoke in us the courage—moral, spiritual, and personal—and the heroism which brought us into the Rabbinate in the first place, so that we may restore it to its historic role; and that it, in turn, may restore us to the awareness of the dignity of our calling. Our challenges are mighty. The obstacles are high. The path is difficult. But with strength and vigor we shall prevail. We shall overcome (91, 93).<sup>14</sup>

As widely attested in his writings, during his 25 years in the active rabbinate, and later as President and *Rosh ha-Yeshiva* at Yeshiva University and RIETS, R. Lamm championed the harmonization of *Ahavat ha-Torah* and *Ahavat Yisrael*, of “*Shalom ve-Emet* – Peace and Truth, or Harmony and Integrity... *Hesed u-Gevura*.”<sup>15</sup> At almost every *Hag ha-Semikha*, especially when American Orthodoxy reached its triumphant years beginning in the 1980s, in good part under his stewardship, R. Lamm drummed into new *musmakhim* the credo of centrism and radical moderation, “not as a policy of prudence but a philosophy of character and society.”<sup>16</sup> “As you grow and gain in influence in the rabbinate,” R. Lamm charged, “do what you can to bring peace and reconciliation and harmony to our harassed

community. Reach out to others in the community to cooperate in bringing Torah to the masses of Jews who are alienated from it.”<sup>17</sup>

Throughout his career, R. Norman Lamm was a builder, and he expected no less from his myriads of students. The truth by which he served and lived was that “these twin loves, the love of Torah and the love of Israel, are what a true *rav*, a true *ben Torah*, has left even after he has forgotten all that he has learned. These are the basic attitudes that inform and orient and motivate him.”<sup>18</sup> This is the preeminent halakha one affirms daily: Torah scholars increase peace in the world through the courageous and creative harmonization of truth and kindness. There is no more sublime, nor challenging, calling.

<sup>1</sup> Norman Lamm, “A Perfect World (2002)” in *The Spirit of the Rabbinate: A Collection of Chag HaSemikhah Addresses Delivered by Rabbi Norman Lamm* (RIETS/YU, 2010), 79.

<sup>2</sup> See Norman Lamm, “The Rabbi as Spiritual Leader” in *The Rabbinate as Calling and Vocation: Models of Rabbinic Leadership*, ed. B. Herring (Aronson, 1991), 239–245; and the nine essays on the rabbinate in *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, 79–169 as well as the collection in note 1.

<sup>3</sup> R. Lamm himself espoused an overarching worldview of dialectical and multivalued pluralism for both Torah interpretation and communal affairs, despite his recognition that the term is often perceived as a lexical bugaboo. See Norman Lamm, “A Pluralistic Torah Community,” *Torah Umadda* (Maggid, 2010), 191–201, and fn. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Lamm, “A Perfect World,” 79. For examples, see: Norman Lamm, “Preface to the Third Edition,” *Torah Umadda* (Maggid, 2010), ix–x; his exchange with Professor Aaron Twerski in *The Jewish Observer* 21:3 (April 1988), 6–9, and 21:5 (Summer 1988), 13–26; Zev Eleff, “Gifter Slaughters Lamm for Passover (1988),” *Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History* (University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 257–355. See also Zev Eleff and Seth Farber, “Antimodernism and Orthodox Judaism’s Heretical Imperative: An American Religious Counterpoint,” *Religion and American Culture* 30:2 (2020), 237–272.

<sup>5</sup> R. Lamm presumably referred to the teaching in *Berakhot* 64a (and five other places in the Talmud) as a Mishna because it also appears in *Avot de-R. Natan*, ver. 2, 48.

<sup>6</sup> “To Be a Man” (October 14, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> “Preachers,” per the vocabulary of British Jewry of the twentieth century, included a variety of Orthodox clergy, whose nominal honorifics included Chief Rabbi, rabbis, *dayanim*, ministers, and reverends. For a digital image of the conference, see <https://sjac-collection.is.ed.ac.uk/record/111279> (R. Lamm is standing next to Chief Rabbi Jakobovits, front row center).

<sup>8</sup> See “Modern Orthodoxy’s Identity Crisis,” *Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, 35–40; Eleff, *Modern Orthodox Judaism*, 189–195.

<sup>9</sup> See Charles S. Liebman, “Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life,” *American Jewish Year Book* (1965), 21–98; Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (Yale, 2019), 293–323.

<sup>10</sup> See Norman Cohen, “The Religious Crisis in Anglo-Jewry,” *TRADITION* 8:2 (1966), 40–57; Shlomo Jakobovits, “Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobovits *zt”l*,” *Jewish Action* (Spring 2000); Miri J. Freud-Kandel, *Orthodox Judaism in Britain Since 1913* (Valentine Mitchell, 2006); Benjamin Elton, *Britain’s Chief Rabbis and The Religious Character of Anglo-Jewry 1880-1970* (Manchester University Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> “The Challenges of the Modern Rabbinate (1968),” *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, 81–93. See also “Rabbis clash with lay leaders,” *Jewish Chronicle* (May 10, 1968), 23: “One of the highlights of the conference was a lecture on Monday by Rabbi Norman Lamm, of the Jewish Centre, New York, who stressed two points: Jewish day schools and the need for the rabbinate to reassert itself in the eyes of the laity.” Thanks to Zev Eleff for this source.

<sup>12</sup> This critique is somewhat ironic coming from the rabbi of The Jewish Center. See David Kaufman, *Shul with a Pool: The “Synagogue-Center” in American Jewish History* (Brandeis, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Strong, courageous leadership is also emphasized in “There Is a Prophet in Israel (1986),” *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, 130–131; “A Rabbi Inside and Out (1990),” *ibid.*, 139–140; “The Who, What, and Where of the Rabbinate (1998),” *ibid.*, 155–156.

<sup>14</sup> It is a bit jarring to our contemporary ears to hear R. Lamm end his May 1968 address to Anglo-Jewish Orthodox preachers with the civil rights slogan “we shall overcome,” just a month after the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dr. King’s own use of the refrain in many of his most well-known orations. R. Lamm was an advocate for civil rights and outspoken against racism, see Shmuel Lamm, “Rabbi Norman Lamm’s Theology of Anti-Racism,” *TheLehrhaus.com* (July 13, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> See “‘Peace and Truth’: Strategies for Their Reconciliation – A Meditation,” in *Reverence, Righteousness, and Rahamanut: Essays in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung*, ed. Jacob J. Schacter (Aronson, 1992), 193–199; “A Pluralistic Torah Community,” *Torah Umadda* (Maggid, 2010), 191–201.

<sup>16</sup> See “Centrist Orthodoxy and Moderationism: Definitions and Desiderata,” *Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, 41–53; “The Self-Image of the Rabbi (1981),” *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, 114–116, 118; “The Spirit of Elijah Rests Upon Elisha (1994),” *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, 149–151.

<sup>17</sup> “The Spirit of Elijah Rests Upon Elisha,” 151.

<sup>18</sup> “The Makings of a Ben Torah (1983),” *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, 124.

*Rabbi Norman Lamm zt”l graciously mentored me from 1993-1995, while I served as the rabbinic intern, then assistant rabbi, then acting rabbi at The Jewish Center, under the leadership of my primary rabbinical mentor, Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter. R. Lamm has been a strong role model for me since my formative years as a student at YU and RIETS. I remain forever grateful.*