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## NOTES ON AN UNREPENTANT KOTZKER DARSHAN

### “Notes of an Unrepentant *Darshan*” (1986)

Rabbi Norman Lamm’s apologia for sermonics, “Notes of an Unrepentant *Darshan*,” was widely-circulated after its publication in 1986, and has only grown in popularity since his sermons appeared some ten years ago on the Yeshiva University Library website.<sup>1</sup> R. Lamm’s insistence that “an irrepressible hunger for the spirit abounds in the land, and it will seek out not only metaphysical ends and halakhic discipline but also the esthetics of the agadic tradition” (6) has proven prescient in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The renewed appreciation for R. Lamm’s impact as a *darshan* is arguably connected to the wider embrace of spirituality in our time.

But notwithstanding the broad appreciation of R. Lamm’s surpassing achievement as a *darshan*, few have closely considered the *texts* that comprised his sermonic opus. What can be said about the sources to which R. Lamm turned in nourishing that “irrepressible hunger?”

In truth, many of R. Lamm’s favored sermonic texts come as no surprise. In addition to regularly citing *Hazal*, Rashi, and Nahmanides, his sermons regularly reference the Zohar and R. Hayyim of Volozhin. More interesting, Rav Kook appears in 25 sermons, and R. Lamm’s *rebbe* Rav Soloveitchik in “just” twenty. Still, given R. Lamm’s intellectual interests and influences, none of this is unexpected.

Given his Hasidic family roots and love for its literature, R. Lamm’s extensive reliance on Hasidic *vertlach* in his sermons is equally unsurprising. For instance, the term “Hasidism” appears in 37 sermons in the on-line collection. Nonetheless, a close study of the sermons reveals a number of key insights concerning the canon of texts he quotes.

First: Often, R. Lamm did not feel compelled to cite anything beyond the verses themselves. If the verses lent themselves to a compelling homily, he had no need to “prove himself” to his congregation—or

himself—by piling on additional texts to support something already evident in the weekly *parasha*.

For example, in one of his most abiding images, to which he was to return in the 1986 Centennial *Hag ha-Semikha*, R. Lamm simply reads the story of Naaman the leper as a metaphor for the illnesses of modern secularism. In “Pharaoh’s Heart – Again” (Passover 1975), he asks why the Haggadah omits all mention of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, to which he replies that this phenomenon is not unique to the Egyptian monarch—it has happened to every major enemy of the Jews throughout the generations. Similarly, in “At Summer’s End” (*Nitzavim-Vayelech* 1963), he utilizes the phrase “*va-anahnu lo noshanu*,” and we have not been saved (from that season’s *Selibot*), as a refrain arguing that we ought not end the year with self-congratulations but with shame for our shortcomings. In all these cases, one primary source provides a more-than-adequate foundation for the sermon.

And even when he does cite later texts in support of his key contentions, as in the case of “The View from the Brink” (*Toldot* 1962), where he quotes multiple passages from the Talmud, his key insight—that there are two possible responses to the threat of annihilation, a valuation of every moment or nihilism—is developed simply on the basis of the straightforward reading of the exchange between Jacob and Esau regarding the lentil soup and the birthright.

Second: The sheer range of texts R. Lamm draws on is simply dazzling. He drew on the full gamut of midrashic literature; the Talmud; medieval, early modern, and modern commentators ranging from Rashi and Nahmanides to *Ha-Ketav veba-Kabbala* and Netziv; the Zohar; a host of Hasidic masters; and his own teachers.

This eclecticism is an outgrowth not only of his own broad intellectual vistas but also of his aim as a sermonizer: the wider his oeuvre, the more texts are at his disposal with which he can inspire his audience. Indeed, in “Notes of an Unrepentant *Darshan*,” he makes this observation regarding R. Soloveitchik, rueing the fact that

The Rav did what none of us could afford to do—he *luxuriated* in his *derashot*, freely choosing his texts not only from Midrash and Agadah and classical exegetes, but also from Halakhah and Kabbalah and Jewish thought and family traditions, and all these supplemented by the whole range of Western philosophy and mathematics and history of science, cited for their substance and not as mere ornamentation (9).

Regarding the sermons collected in *Festivals of Faith*, David Shatz makes a similar point regarding the breadth of R. Lamm’s own sermonic sources:

Variety is the hallmark of this collection. As the index reveals, of the nearly 320 traditional texts that Rabbi Lamm quotes, only eighteen appear in more than one sermon (usually for different purposes and with different interpretations), and only one quoted text appears in more than two sermons. In addition, if one were to formulate the main moral of each sermon, the *mussar baskel*, one would realize that virtually every sermon has a fresh message. Thus, while obviously some themes recur and there is a consistency of orientation, in almost every presentation Rabbi Lamm provides novelty—*hiddush*—as regards both text and message (xix).

To Shatz's observation we may add that what is true of the holiday sermon collection is equally true of R. Lamm's sermons as a whole.

Yet even in his choices of material for *derush*, we can say more about what exactly was "on R. Lamm's bookshelf." True, a master *darshan* will intentionally seek to marshal a wide range of texts to support his message. But an effective homiletician, like any good teacher, will tend to return to the texts with which he is most familiar and that are most beloved to him. What texts, then, did R. Lamm cite most regularly in his sermons?

This leads us to our third observation, which will occupy our attention for the remainder of this essay: of all the Hasidic masters on whom R. Lamm relies, he quotes R. Menahem Mendel of Kotzk more than any other.

The evidence, even from the limited search functionality currently in place on the Archives site, is suggestive. The Besht appears in ten sermons. Perhaps as a measure of the era in which R. Lamm was active as a *darshan*, Rabbi Nahman of Breslov is cited on just six occasions. *Hiddushei ha-Rim* appears on three occasions, and his son *Sefat Emet* another five. R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Habad, appears thirteen times.

But pride of place goes to the Kotzker, who is cited on twenty occasions throughout the sermons, and is often introduced by an approbation, which R. Lamm only rarely delivered in his sermons.<sup>2</sup> On Shavuot 1964, he noted that the Kotzker's "challenging insights are always relevant to every age." On Rosh Hashana 1969, he declared the Kotzker "one of the most profound and mysterious of the Polish Hasidic leaders." On Shavuot 1970, he simply dubbed him "the great Kotzker Rebbe," emphasizing that the Kotzker's ideas are sufficiently important to be worth returning to time after time.

One idea from the Kotzker was among his favorite *divrei Torah*; he shared it with me on at least a half-dozen occasions. It appears in "In the Days of Smallness" (*Yitro* 1962; see also *The Shema*, 152):

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The Rabbi of Kotzk asked: why, in the Shema, do we read: “and these words shall be on your heart?” Why do we say *al levavekha*, “on your heart” and why not *bi-levavekha*, “in your heart?” And the Rabbi of Kotzk answers: it is not too often that the heart is open and that the words of God can enter directly into it. Usually the heart is closed, indifferent, and even callous. Yet the Torah demands that if the words of the Lord cannot come right into an open heart, then at least they shall be placed on the closed heart, so that during those moments of greatness and inspiration, when the human heart suddenly opens up, then the words of Torah which had been piled on it will tumble in and fill the heart with the seeds of true greatness and sublimity.

R. Lamm’s heavy reliance on the Kotzker is, in itself, not overly surprising. The Kotzker was renowned for his insights, and R. Lamm is far from the only *darshan* to have extensively cited his ideas.<sup>3</sup> What is more, like the Kotzker himself, R. Lamm was similarly renowned for his piercing witticisms.<sup>4</sup>

But R. Lamm’s citations of the Kotzker extended far beyond sheer quantity. In fact, there was a deeper affinity he felt for the Kotzker.

First, R. Lamm featured the Kotzker in a number of especially important sermons. For example, he cited the Kotzker in his maiden speech as rabbi of the Kadimoh Synagogue, in Springfield, MA, in 1954, when he closed by relying on the Kotzker’s distinction between *eruv* and *netilat yadayim*, which the Kotzker takes to mean that a leader must strike the fine balance between knowing when to intermingle with the community and when to “wash one’s hands” and remain apart. (Also of significance, while he rarely utilized the same *vort* twice, in this case he made an exception, concluding a 1973 Jewish Center sermon titled “Spiritual Leadership: The Moral Risks,” with this same *bon mot*.) He cited “the great Kotzker Rebbe” in two consecutive Rosh Hashana talks, among the most significant sermons of the year. His 1969 Rosh Hashana sermon titled “The Greatest Trial” contends, based on the Kotzker, that sometimes the greatest trial is not to be willing to make a sacrifice, but to reverse course and admit that the intended sacrifice was wrong-headed all along. Just a year later, concluding his Rosh Hashana sermon, R. Lamm returned to the Kotzker, who comments on a classic midrashic aphorism in emphasizing the importance of avoiding shallow religious experience:

If you will open up to me the size of a needle prick, I will open up to you like the great doors of a giant hall... Said the Kotzker: that is true, all God demands of us is the opening the size of the head of a needle—but, it

must be *durch un durch*, through and through. It is not sufficient merely to prick the surface of life, but we must go through and through, to the very depth...

Second, even more telling than the *occasions* on which R. Lamm cited the Kotzker is the *centrality* he assigned the Kotzker's ideas in many sermons.

Here we may draw a distinction, perhaps overly neat to be a precise measure of a text's significance, but still one that provides a useful heuristic. A *darshan* may cite a text merely to support an idea that he has already begun to develop, or he may assign to a text a more pivotal role in the *derasha*. That more pivotal role can take one of at least three forms: the *darshan* can use the text as a starting point from which the sermon launches, as a conclusion to clinch the message of the sermon, or as the central axis around which the entire sermon revolves.

R. Lamm's profound indebtedness to the Kotzker is evident in his multifaceted use of citations. Throughout his long engagement of weaving the Kotzker's teachings into his sermons, he made use of the citations in each of the three distinct manners outlined above.

For instance, "The Shield of Abraham" (*Lekh Lekha* 1967) begins by outlining the Kotzker's interpretation of the mishna in *Avot* that states that the world stands upon Torah, *avoda*, and *gemilut hasadim*. The Kotzker maintains that *gemilut hasadim* (acts of kindness) serves as the foundation for the other two pillars, namely Torah study and divine service. To this R. Lamm adds a wrinkle of his own: It is possible to study Torah with or without the spirit of kindness; it is possible to serve God with or without kindness; and it is even possible to give to others with or without a spirit of generosity! Here we have one example of him opening the sermon with the Kotzker's insight, and then developing the sermon by taking the idea yet one step further.

As noted previously, R. Lamm concluded sermons in both 1954 and 1973 with the Kotzker's distinction between *eruv* and *netilat yadayim*, and, in 1970, closed a Rosh Hashana sermon with the Kotzker's urging that one's religious commitment must go "through and through." These are instances of the second category, in which the *darshan* encapsulates his overarching message by concluding the sermon with a particularly powerful or evocative homily.

Most significant, on numerous occasions R. Lamm used an insight of the Kotzker as the focal point of an entire sermon. In the aforementioned Rosh Hashana sermon "The Greatest Trial," for example, he used an insight of the Kotzker regarding the *Akeida* as the linchpin of his presentation. In "Too Wise, Too Foolish" (*Korah* 1974) he again used an insight

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of the Kotzker as a sermonic centerpiece: Korah, like modern man, was “overly clever,” overlooking the importance of the moral dimension of the intellect. Elsewhere (“Good G-d,” *Bereishit* 1962), R. Lamm builds his sermon around the Kotzker’s brilliant imagery of “a *tzaddik* in *peltz*,” a pseudo-righteous individual who instead of lighting a fire, which warms himself and others, dons a fur coat, demonstrating that he cares for his own comfort but not the community, and is anything but a righteous individual.

Taken together, the quantity, timing, and pivotal role R. Lamm assigned the Kotzker in his sermons points to a deeper connection between himself and the Kotzker. But what was the nature of that connection? What about the Kotzker resonated so deeply in R. Lamm?

Here, the metaphor of the fur-clad *tzaddik* is instructive. The Kotzker’s abhorrence for hypocrisy is the stuff of legend. Less well-known is the extent to which R. Lamm was profoundly concerned with the motifs of truth and authenticity in one’s religious life. In fact, he dedicated an unusually large number of his sermons to these themes. Tellingly, on many of these occasions he turned to the Kotzker when developing these themes.

In a June 18, 1955 sermon at Kadimoh, for instance, R. Lamm cited the Kotzker Rebbe’s analysis of the spies’ report. The Kotzker claims that while from a technical standpoint the ten spies spoke *accurately*, they still could not be said to have spoken *truthfully* in that they failed to capture the larger spirit of the truth. Truth is about more than getting the technicalities right; it is about accurately presenting facts in a larger context that is not misleading.

In a 1960 sermon titled “Grandeur: A Jewish Reflection,” R. Lamm pointed to *Pirkei Avot* (2:1) which insists that *tiferet*, splendor, must be that which emerges *min ha-adam*, from man (here homiletically interpreted as the grandeur from within himself). True splendor, he explained, can only come from within, when it remains consistent with one’s own character.

In his wittily-titled 1961 talk “A Sermon for the Sensitive,” R. Lamm relies on the Kotzker to contend that sometimes our oversensitivity to sarcastic remarks from others can lead us away from speaking and acting upon the truth. He returned again to this motif in 1970, declaring in “Why Moral People Need the Torah” that righteousness requires a combination of goodness, cleverness, and piety.

In the 1971 sermon “The New Generation – A Summer’s View,” R. Lamm made a similar point, insisting that the ten spies’ sin consisted in their having esteemed public opinion too heavily, again citing the Kotzker in support of his interpretation:

Authentic Jews, authentic human beings, should not care how they appear in the eyes of others! A real person is concerned about conforming to his own highest standards, about being loyal to God, to morality, to Torah, to tradition, to whatever standards he sets for himself as the guiding principles of his life. He has no business viewing himself through the eyes of society, appraising his own life by the canons of someone else's taste, judging his own conduct and formulating his own destiny by the standards imposed by some powerful stranger.

In his Passover 1972 sermon titled “The Paschal Lamb and Sacred Bull,” R. Lamm notes that the youth's major accusation against the officials is that of hypocrisy—and in this, he acknowledges, they are not wrong! He concludes:

It is good to remember the words of the Rabbi of Kotzk: it may not be in every man's power to find the truth. But it is certainly within his power to reject lies, cheating, and hypocrisy.

Finally, in the 1974 “Keep Thyself Far from an Inoperative Statement,” he relied on the Kotzker's teaching that the entire Torah is a commentary on “keep thyself far from a false matter” (Exodus 23:7) in excoriating those in power who refused to call a lie a lie:

In Washington of the Watergate era, a new term has been invented for a lie. It was first propagated by the Press Secretary of the President when, instead of saying that he had earlier lied, said, interestingly, that his previous statement was “inoperative.” One can imagine a new English translation of the Torah, according to the Authorized Version of Ron Ziegler: “keep thyself far from an inoperative statement.”

R. Lamm's penchant for calling out hypocrisy extended even beyond his pulpit sermons. To take just one case-in-point, taken from an Address to Orthodox Congregations delivered in 1997 titled simply “Some Thoughts on Leadership,” he offered four recommendations as to principles that ought to guide Orthodox leadership in the coming years. Of these, the second is that “our means must be as honorable as our ends” (67). “Our goal, our aspiration, our Torah, is *emet* [truth], and it deserves that we pursue it with *emet*” (70).

He continued with the third of his directives:

The concern for *emet* leads me to the third of the four points I wish to raise. And that is, that Truth demands that our inner life and outer life correspond with each other, that we be—in the Talmudic phrase—*tokho*

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*ke'varo*, that there be no discrepancy and certainly no contradiction between what we are and what we strive to appear to be.... I mention this because the Orthodox community is more and more getting “hung up” on externals, on *chitzoniyyut*, and less and less on *penimiyut* or inwardness, thus enlarging the gap between what we are and what we pretend to be.<sup>5</sup>

To support this point, R. Lamm provides one final insight from the Kotzker. The verse says that upon hearing the report of the ten spies, Caleb and Joshua “tore their clothing” (Numbers 14:6). Why did they respond in precisely this way, and why does the Torah emphasize that the two spies had also toured the Land of Canaan, something which the reader already knows well? To which he responded:

The Kotzker Rebbe explains: The spies were princes of the tribes of Israel, distinguished individuals dressed, undoubtedly, in fur *shtreimlach* and handsome *bekishes* and white stockings, etc.—the full regalia of demonstratively frum people. Yet they inwardly had no faith in God’s word, they spoke ill of *Eretz Yisrael*, they created havoc among their people. So Joshua and Caleb said: in that case, who needs the pretentiously religious garb? And so they therefore ripped the ostentatious attire off the backs of the ten traitors, the ten who were of “those who spied the land.” The verse thus reads: Joshua and Caleb, *comma*, tore off the clothing off those who spied out the land... The two who were loyal, and the Kotzker in his day, were too devoted to *emet* to tolerate fashionable hypocrisy (71–72).

A generation later, we still hear the echoes of R. Lamm’s clarion call to integrity.

Before closing, we would be derelict if we did not acknowledge that, his allergy to hypocrisy notwithstanding, in other sermons R. Lamm strikes a different chord in demonstrating a willingness to tolerate a modicum of hypocrisy.

Take the case of “Sincerely Yours” (*Vayishlach* 1965), which he opened by echoing his audience’s intuition that “hypocrisy is rightly a despised trait” and adding that “Our prophets stormed against hypocrisy.” Yet, noting the Mishna’s assertion that the story of Reuven is read but not translated in shul (*Megilla* 4:10), he went on to observe that

certain forms of such insincerity are not malicious but wholesome and healthy. Not in all ways must one’s appearances be thoroughly equivalent and correspond to his inner thoughts. To speak a conscious untruth



aiming at personal gain or creating a favorable image and false impression, is a foul act. But to refrain from telling all I know and consider to be true, either because I am unsure how that truth will be interpreted, or out of respect for the sensitivity and feelings for others—that is an act of civility, not insincerity.

Similarly, in “Living Up to Your Image” (*Teruma* 1968), he begins by referring to the Talmud’s notion that an authentic scholar must live up to the appellation of *tokho ke’varo* (*Yoma* 72b), which R. Lamm terms “a principle of great moral significance.” Yet he goes on to acknowledge that inevitably, as humans, our interiors and exteriors will not match one another perfectly, and that this is acceptable. It is just that when we experience a lack of internal consistency, our goal must be to strive for our inner being to rise to the external level that we project instead of the other way around.

How can we reconcile R. Lamm’s Kotzker-esque allergy to hypocrisy with his acknowledgement that hypocrisy may in fact have a legitimate place in religious experience? The two-fold answer is self-evident but still worth stating. First, we must always bear in mind his audience and his aims as a *darshan*. Of course he opposed hypocrisy. But his primary responsibility in the sermons was to inspire greater religious commitment on the part of his listeners. If he could succeed to inspire his constituents to elevate their religious lives without sacrificing too much of their integrity, he was willing to swallow that bitter pill.

Second, we must recall R. Lamm’s principle of passionate moderation, in which he parts ways from the Kotzker. He insisted that, our zeal to realize truth notwithstanding, we must always bear in mind “the complexities of life, the ‘stubborn and irreducible’ facts of existence, as William James called them, which refuse to yield to simplistic or single-minded conclusions.”<sup>6</sup> Our world, as he put it, is “an *alma di-peruda*, an imperfect and fragmented world” (“Sincerely Yours”).<sup>7</sup> No one value is absolute, no matter how tightly held; even the Kotzker’s clarion call for truth must sometimes give way in the face of competing values. Nothing else would capture the full complexity of the human condition.

Just as life is complex, so is a collection of over 800 of the most varied, creative modern rabbinic sermons ever gathered in one volume (or database). Whether it is R. Lamm’s eclecticism, unusually direct reliance on *peshat*, or his profound indebtedness to the Kotzker, a close study of his homiletic canon richly rewards the undeterred reader of R. Lamm’s sermons.

<sup>1</sup> While many of R. Lamm's sermons were published in his many books, over 800 sermons and speeches are easily accessed online at the Lamm Heritage website ([www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage](http://www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage)). "Notes of an Unrepentant *Darshan*" was originally published in the *RCA Sermon Anthology* (1986), 1–2, and similarly available on the website; it was republished in *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, 94–107.

<sup>2</sup> Historians have questioned the reliability of many of the oral traditions attributed to the Kotzker; see, for example, *A New History of Hasidism*, ed. D. Biale *et al.* (Princeton, 2018), 354, which points to "the lack of authentic teachings that can be attributed to the Kotzker," and Yaakov Levenger, "Authentic Sayings of the Kotzker Rebbe" [Hebrew], *Tarbitz* 55:1 (1985), 109–135. But this is beside the point for our purposes. Our focus is not on the historical Kotzker, but the pithy sayings that were attributed to him by R. Lamm and many other homileticians. It is the *received* tradition of the Kotzker, not the historical Kotzker, which is the subject of our discussion. It should be noted that many scholars see a line from the intellectually-oriented *hasid-lamdan* model of the Kotzker to the Gerrer Rebbes; see Alan Brill, *Thinking God* (Ktav, 2002), 6–7.

<sup>3</sup> For quotations that were widely attributed to the Kotzker, see Levenger, 110.

<sup>4</sup> While many examples of R. Lamm's wit could be cited, one exchange with Dr. Yosef Burg, the influential religious-nationalist Israeli politician, more than suffices. In his eulogy for Dr. Burg, R. Lamm related that he once met Dr. Burg in Hechal Shlomo on *Parashat Vayera*, the Shabbat we read of the binding of Isaac. Dr. Burg saw R. Lamm and quipped, "*ve-ayeh ha-seh le-olah: ven kommen der Lamm oyf aliyah*," meaning: "Where is the sheep for the *olah*. When is the Lamm coming on *aliya*?" R. Lamm immediately retorted, "*be-har Hashem yei-ra'eh: ven der Burg vet zikh vayzen mer getlich*, when your mountain [a reference to Burg, which is Yiddish for mountain] will appear more divine," meaning when Dr. Burg reaches a higher religious level!

<sup>5</sup> "Some Thoughts on Leadership," reprinted in *Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, 65–78.

<sup>6</sup> "Some Notes on Centrist Orthodoxy," *TRADITION* 22:3 (1986), 6; reprinted in *Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, 41–53.

<sup>7</sup> Space does not permit me to elaborate, but I believe that R. Lamm's commitment to passionate moderation is rooted not only in a commonsensical approach to life, but also in his embrace of a natural morality, which requires that we worship God as elevated humans, but nothing more.

I also believe that there are a number of striking similarities between the thought of R. Lamm and that of R. Yehuda Amital, late Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, particularly in their shared commitment to truth, indebtedness to the Kotzker, embrace of natural morality, abhorrence to the abdication of personal responsibility, dedication to Jewish unity as a core value, non-messianic Religious Zionism, love of pithy witticisms, principled flexibility in the face of changing circumstances, and engagement with classical *aharonim*. I hope to develop those parallels in another context.