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THE DISCIPLINE OF LAW AND THE SUBJECTIVITY OF SPIRITUALITY

The Shema: Spirituality and Law in Judaism (Jewish Publication Society, 1998)

I learned from her [my mother] very much. Most of all I learned that Judaism expresses itself not only in formal compliance with the law but also in a living experience. She taught me that there is a flavor, a scent and warmth to *mitzvot*.... The laws of Shabbat, for instance, were passed on to me by my father.... The Shabbat as a living entity, as a queen, was revealed to me by my mother.... The fathers *knew* much about the Shabbat; the mothers *lived* the Shabbat, experienced her presence, and perceived her beauty and splendor.¹

[There is] a serious educational-philosophical problem which has long troubled me. Orthodox youth have discovered the Torah through scholastic forms of thought, intellectual contact and cold logic. However, they have not merited to discover her [the Torah] through a live “experiential” feeling which excites and invigorates the heart. They know the Torah as an idea, but do not directly encounter her as an unmediated “reality,” perceptible to “taste, sight and touch.” Because many of them lack this “Torah-perception,” their world view of Judaism becomes distorted.... In one word, they are confounded on the pathways of Judaism, and this perplexity is the result of unsophisticated perspectives and experiences. Halakha is two-sided... the first is intellectual, but ultimately it is experiential.²

The *Shema* prayer is one of the most central passages in all of Jewish literature. It is so important that parts, or all, of it are traditionally recited four times a day: prior to the *Seder Korbanot* at the beginning of the *Shaharit* Service, twice as part of the *Shaharit* and *Ma'ariv* services, and before bedtime. Its first sentence is the first of three verses suggested as the most fundamental verse in the entire Torah, the anchor upon which everything

rests.³ It is the one verse that, more than any other, represents the fealty that the Jewish people have to God. The Midrash states that the Jewish people said to God, “How many forced conversions and terrible decrees have they decreed against us in order to abolish Your kingship and mastery from us, but we did not abolish [them]. Rather, every day we come to houses of prayer and houses of study and we coronate the name of Your divinity twice daily, and say, ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.’”⁴ When the “priest anointed for war” rallied his troops for battle, the first words he uttered were “*Shema Yisrael*.” Commenting on this, the Talmud (*Sota* 42a) explains that none other than God Himself said to the Jewish people, “Even if you have not fulfilled any mitzva except reciting the *Shema* in the morning and the evening you will not be delivered into the hands of your enemies.” Rabbenu Yona writes that the *Shema* is the most exalted of all formulations that fall under the category of “matters of sanctity (*devarim she-bi-kedusha*)” because it includes accepting “the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven.”⁵

The *Shema* has come to be identified as the quintessential expression of Jewish faith, and its first sentence was—and is—recited at a most critical moment in a person’s life, as one’s soul departs. A most striking example of this is the experience of Jewish soldiers finding themselves on opposite sides in war. On October 24, 1914, Rabbi Gedaliah Silverstone, a graduate of the Telz Yeshiva in Lithuania who was serving a congregation in Washington, DC, delivered a sermon in which he expressed his great pain about the terrible dilemmas Jewish soldiers faced while fighting in the “Great War.” He said:

Whose heart did not throb with agony, whose eyes did not fill with tears, whose blood did not turn cold in his veins upon reading in the newspapers about a Jewish soldier in the Russian army who stabbed with his bayonet a soldier from the Austrian army? The mortally wounded man cried out with his last breath: “*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad*” and with the word *Ehad* his soul departed. When the Russian soldier realized that he had killed one of his brothers, that he had thrust his bayonet into a fellow Jew, he went out of his mind with grief.⁶

Other versions of the story may differ with regard to details but the basic point is the same, the great evocative power of these words of *Shema*.⁷

In 1998, Dr. Norman Lamm published a book titled, *The Shema: Spirituality and Law in Judaism*.⁸ I have it on good authority that he considered it to be his most important book, and he was disappointed that it did not get the degree of attention he thought it deserved.⁹ It is

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primarily a commentary on the first six verses of the first paragraph of the Shema, analyzing them from a variety of perspectives. He devoted eight chapters to the first verse, six chapters to the second verse, and two chapters to verses 3–6. His analysis is primarily kabbalistic, somewhat philosophical, and, in an appendix at the end of the work, also halakhic.

This work is representative of multiple aspects of Dr. Lamm's personality and wide-ranging interests. First, it is an example of his identity as a pedagogue, something often overlooked among the constellation of his many roles and achievements. Much of his published scholarship originated as oral presentations. At the beginning of his "Preface," Dr. Lamm noted that the book began as a series of lectures he delivered to students at a Senior Honors Seminar at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary in 1992-1993, five years before it took printed form. Dr. Lamm appreciated the supreme power of these two very different modes of expression, and he was a master of them both. This transition from the oral presentation to written text reflects one of his major priorities. First, he expended great effort into preparing his oral presentations. They were crafted with great care, indicating the high standards he had for himself and the respect he had for his audience. (More than once I stood with him under a *huppa* and saw him remove index cards from his pocket to which he repeatedly referred while he spoke.) But in addition to the exacting preparation he invested in lectures, sermons, and *shiurim*, he had the discipline and focus to craft his oral presentations into written articles and books. But that alone was not sufficient. He understood that the transformation from speech to scholarship could not be accomplished with a mere transcript. As a respected academic and wordsmith, he invested the time and intellectual rigor to produce works of enduring written value.

Second, this book is an example of one of Dr. Lamm's intellectual passions. He was wont to focus on dualities that appeared to be very different from one another and sometimes even mutually exclusive, but which he consistently argued were both simultaneously significant and reciprocally resonant. Into this category I would place: Torah and *Madda*; faith and doubt; *halakhot*, normative legal requirements, and *halikhot*, the world of religious thought; science and religion; law and ethics; *emet* and *shalom*; halakha and *aggada*; *hakham* and *hasid*; and knowing and learning.¹⁰ His *The Shema* is yet another example of this focus. Subtitled "Spirituality and Law," Dr. Lamm deals with both, as well as the dialectical tension between them (more on this below).

Third, this work is a prominent example of the extraordinarily wide-ranging collection of sources with which we have become familiar in so

many of Dr. Lamm's works. We are treated here to an in-depth analysis of a very wide array of halakhic, philosophic, kabbalistic, and Hasidic texts. We encounter the usual sources we would expect to find in a work devoted to understanding the *Shema: Hazal* presented both in the Talmud and Midrash, R. Sa'adia Gaon, Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* and *Moreh Nevukhim*, Ramban, R. Abraham ibn Ezra, and *Sefer ha-Hinukh*. But there is more, much more: R. Abraham Seba's *Tzeror ha-Mor*, teachings of R. Isaac Luria (Ari) and R. Moses Cordovero, Maharal's *Netivot Olam* and R. Isaiah Horowitz's *Shenei Luhot ha-Berit*, R. Hayyim Volozhiner's *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, works of Samuel David Luzzatto (Shadal), R. Samson Raphael Hirsch's *Horeb*, R. Naftali Zevi Yehuda Berlin's *Ha'amek Davar*, R. Meir Simhah of Dvinsk's *Meshekh Hokhmah*, Rav Kook's 'Olat Re'iyah, the Hebrew author and Nobel laureate Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the Catholic theologian Theodore Rosznak and Protestant thinker Rudolf Otto, and much of the scholarly literature on the subject.

But pride of place was reserved for Hasidic literature, here represented in breathtaking depth and breadth. Among the Hasidic works cited by Dr. Lamm are: R. Shneur Zalman's *Tanya*, R. Tzvi Elimelech Shapira of Dinov's *Benei Yissaskhar*, R. Tzvi Hirsch of Ziditchov's *Sur me-Ra va-Asei Tov*, R. Tzadok Hakohen's *Tzidkat ha-Tzaddik* and *Peri Tzaddik*, and various teachings of R. Dov Ber of Mezritch and R. Menahem Mendel of Kotzk.

One example of his reliance upon Hasidic material is found in his seventh chapter devoted to explaining the significance of the connection between the first sentence of the *Shema* and the additional passage of "*Barukh shem kevod malkhuto le-'olam va'ed*" that follows it. He presents this matter as a fundamental disagreement between R. Shneur Zalman and R. Tzvi Hirsch of Ziditchov as to the meaning of the Zohar's characterization of each of these sentences, the first as *yibuda ila'a* or "Higher Unification" and the second as *yibuda tata'a* or "Lower Unification." R. Shneur Zalman (and R. Hayyim of Volozhin) understands the phrase "the Lord is One" in the first sentence to mean not just that the Lord is the only god but that He is all that really exists. Nothing other than God can be said to exist. The world is reduced to nothingness; it is merely an illusion. Addressing the obvious problem that the entire enterprise of halakha is predicated on the fact that people exist in a "real" world, he explains that God wants human beings to act *as if* their experience in the world was real, and this is expressed in the *Barukh shem* sentence. "Higher Unification" is to be understood as coming "from His side" while "Lower Unification" comes from "our side." From our limited human point of view the world is real and it is within that context that we engage in our dialogue with God.

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R. Tzvi Hirsch of Ziditchov critiques this perspective because it is too intellectual, too abstract. It inheres in the first verse of the *Shema* a concept too far from one's ongoing experience to be religiously satisfying, deferring the experience of God's presence to the second, *Barukh shem* passage. In his reading of the Zohar's characterization of these two sentences, he sees the first one as pointing "from below to above" reflecting an effort to ascend from the mundane world of human existence to achieve a "Higher Unification," to unite with the *Ehad* or First Cause, with the Creator Himself. When reciting the second, *Barukh shem* passage, we move in the opposite direction, praying that God's sanctity and blessing move "from above to below," from God Himself until it unites with us, His creations who inhabit the earthly domain.

It should be clear that only someone deeply versed in Hasidic thought could appreciate, and make an effort to explain, these complex ideas.

I have gone to some length to cite (only most of) the sources Dr. Lamm discusses in this book, and provide just one example of his thinking, to illustrate his complete mastery of these widely disparate bodies of knowledge. He read widely and incorporated that material into his many and multifaceted works. And, amazingly, he accomplished all this while serving in the very demanding position as President of Yeshiva University.

Finally, this work provides yet another example of how Dr. Lamm never shied away from directly addressing issues of real contemporary significance. He did so not only regularly in his sermons but also in his many addresses and written works. In the course of his long career as pulpit rabbi and public figure, he addressed issues related to: evil, the Holocaust, faith, women's roles in Orthodoxy, religious Zionism and the State of Israel, attitudes towards non-observant Jews, Jewish communal unity, the rabbinate, Jewish education, sexuality, Judaism and Christianity, ecology, leisure, extraterrestrial life, privacy, self-incrimination, and morality and the family, and more. Much more.

In subtitled this work "Spirituality and Law in Judaism," Dr. Lamm telegraphed to his readers the importance of both of these fundamental components of the religious life. In this he was following his teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, but he expanded significantly on R. Soloveitchik's perspective. In the two quotes cited above, and in other places in his writings, R. Soloveitchik addressed himself to the members of the "covenantal community" already committed to Torah observance. He made the case that their fealty to the "law" alone was insufficient but that they needed to expand their understanding of Judaism also to include the "flavor, scent and warmth," the "beauty and splendor," the

“taste, sight and touch” of *mitzvot*. He argued, nay pleaded, that “spirituality” was also an essential element of their religious lives and commitments.¹¹

Dr. Lamm made this point as well. He wrote that, “Law alone is artificial and insensitive.... Without the sweep of the soaring soul, the corpus of the law tends to become a corpse.” However, very much attuned as he was to the reality and challenges of the modern human condition, Dr. Lamm also made the opposite argument, directing his attention to those not (yet) committed to Torah observance. He understood very well how totally immersed they are in a world that celebrates personal autonomy, with its subjective celebration of virtually anything as an appropriate spiritual expression, and to them he made a case for fealty to “law.” “Spirituality alone begets antinomianism and chaos.... Without the body of the law, spirituality is a ghost.” In a culture that worships the God of “spirituality,” where any possible expression of the spirit is deemed perfectly acceptable and legitimate, Dr. Lamm argued for the indispensable value of structure, of limits, of submission to authority. And it was precisely to the mitzva of reciting the *Shema* that he turned as a case study to demonstrate the central non-negotiable importance of both recital (law) and *kavvana* or intention (spirituality) in proper Jewish ritual observance in general.¹² As in so many other cases, Dr. Lamm was here fully cognizant of the *zeitgeist* and did not shy away from confronting it head on, boldly and articulately presenting the perspective of traditional Judaism.

This theme—the central importance of both behavior and emotion, of act and affect, of “religion in manifestation” and “religion in essence”¹³—is one to which Dr. Lamm returned again and again throughout his talks and writings. His article on the passage of “*Barukh shem kevod malkhuto le-‘olam va‘ed*” that follows the first sentence of the *Shema*, the first part of which is summarized in chapter 7, also deals with this theme from an intellectual perspective. In reflecting on the sin that led to the death of Nadav and Avihu, the two sons of Aaron, he said, “The Torah tells us that they brought a ‘strange fire,’ by which is meant that their religious emotion was present, but it was divorced from Halakhah. They brought *esh* but it was *zara*. The Rabbis teach us that their Halakhah was divorced from ethical conduct.”¹⁴ This theme was on his mind a lot and it served as the focal point of departure for his *Shema* book.

I end this essay with a “concluding unscientific postscript,” to borrow part of a book title by Søren Kierkegaard. It is with a deep sense of sadness and personal loss that I write these words of appreciation of just one

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work in the large corpus of writings bequeathed us by Dr. Norman Lamm ז"ל. Dr. Lamm loomed large in my life from the time I was a child. When I started to think seriously of my own career path and decided on the rabbinate, I, simply, aspired to be like him. As a young man, I looked up to him as someone embodying everything I hoped to become, a Jewish leader who personally combined both the discipline of law and subjectivity of spirituality, and a pulpit rabbi and engaged communal leader who was, simultaneously, a serious academic scholar. I wanted to speak like him, to write like him, and to deliver thoughtful and articulate talks, like him. When, in 1981, I assumed the position of rabbi of The Jewish Center where he had served with great distinction for some seventeen years, he was for me a great source of communal wisdom and personal strength. My own *hakarat ha-tov* to him is enormous.

Dr. Lamm's last years were difficult, very difficult. After I, too, had moved on from The Jewish Center I went to visit the Lamm apartment a number of times, mostly before Rosh Hashana and the *yamim tovim*. Mrs. Lamm greeted me with great exuberance and joy, making me feel so welcome; Dr. Lamm was sitting at the table in the dining room in a white shirt and tie. Mrs. Lamm was a real partner to him, and she cared for him throughout their many decades together. We talked, and he nodded. And, before I left, every time, without fail, I took his hands in mine, looked at him squarely in his eyes, and said to him, with a catch in my voice, "Dr. Lamm, I came to see you on behalf of *Kelal Yisrael* to thank you for all you have done for us. We are who and what we are because we stand on your shoulders." Mrs. Lamm beamed. Dr. Lamm nodded. I cried. I gave him a hug and I left.

Now Dr. Lamm is the one who has left and I say to him, "Dr. Lamm, I come on behalf of *Kelal Yisrael* to thank you for all you have done for us. We are who and what we are because we stand on your shoulders." Now, both Mrs. and Dr. Lamm, both together in heaven, are beaming. I am crying.

¹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "A Tribute to the Rebbitzin of Talne," *TRADITION* 17:2 (1978), 77.

² Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "*Al Ahavat ha-Torah ve-Ge'ulat Nefesh ha-Dor*" in *Be-Sod ha-Yahid ve-ha-Yahad* (Orot, 1976), 407–408. See Jeffrey Saks, "Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and the Israeli Chief Rabbinate: Biographical Notes (1959–1960)," *B.D.D.* 17 (2006), 60–61.

³ See Rabbi Jacob ben Solomon ibn Habib's introduction to his *Ein Yaakov* in which he notes that he was unable to find the source of this statement.

⁴ *Midrash Tehillim Shohar Tov* 5:6.

⁵ Rabbenu Yona, *Berakhot* 13b, s.v. *ve-nikdashsti*. I was introduced to this statement in Ezra Bick, *In His Mercy: Understanding the Thirteen Midot* (Maggid Books, 2011), 107.

⁶ Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching in Times of War, 1800-2001* (Littman Library, 2008), 307. The story was first published in *The American Hebrew* (October 30, 1914), 5.

⁷ See, for example, Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching in Times of War*, 304–305; and Derek J. Penslar, *Jews and the Military: A History* (Littman Library, 2013), 141. For other examples, see Esther Farbstein, *Hidden in Thunder: Perspectives on Faith, Halachah and Leadership during the Holocaust*, vol. 2 (Mossad HaRav Kook, 2007), 462–463.

⁸ Norman Lamm, *The Shema: Spirituality and Law in Judaism* (Jewish Publication Society, 1998). The title page expands the subtitle: “...as exemplified in the Shema, the most important passage in the Torah.”

⁹ Conversation with Dr. Lamm’s son, Shalom Lamm (December 30, 2020). He told me that he heard this from his father numerous times.

¹⁰ His fascination with these dualities is attested by the titles of many of his articles and books, as a perusal of David Shatz’s bibliography (appended to this volume) demonstrates: *Torah Umadda*; *Faith and Doubt*; *Halakhot va-Halikhhot*; “Peace and Truth”; “Knowing vs. Learning”; and more.

¹¹ For this aspect of R. Soloveitchik’s thought, see my “*Tzri’a*: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Marriage, Mitzvot and a Jew’s Relationship to God” in *Wisdom by the Week: The Weekly Torah Portion as an Inspiration for Thought and Creativity*, ed. N. Naftali Rothenberg (Ktav, 2011), 324–331; Aharon Lichtenstein, “The Rav at Jubilee: An Appreciation,” in idem., *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Learning*, vol. 1 (Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 2003), 201–202; Jeffrey R. Woolf, “Time Awareness as a Source of Spirituality in the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik,” *Modern Judaism* 32:1 (2012), 54–75.

¹² *The Shema*, 6–11. I addressed this contemporary challenge in my “Halakhic Authority in a World of Personal Autonomy” *Radical Responsibility: Celebrating the Thought of Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks*, ed. M. Harris, et al. (Maggid Books, 2012), 155–176.

¹³ These two phrases come from the title of a 1938 book written by the Dutch scholar G. Van Der Leeuw. I was introduced to it in an article by my teacher, Prof. Isadore Twersky, in his “Religion and Law,” *Religion in a Religious Age*, ed. S. D. Goitein (AJS, 1974), 69 and 78, n. 2. Twersky states that, “Halakah is the indispensable manifestation and prescribed concretization of an underlying and overriding spiritual essence.” For him, like for his father-in-law, R. Soloveitchik, and for Dr. Lamm, this duality was very important. In an earlier article Twersky wrote, “Halachah itself is a tense, vibrant, dialectical system which regularly insists upon normativeness in action and inwardness in feeling and thought.” See his “The *Shulhan Aruk*: Enduring Code of Jewish Law,” *Judaism* 16:2 (1967), 157.

¹⁴ Sermon delivered at The Jewish Center (April 24, 1976) available in the Lamm Heritage Archives (www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage). See also “Religion Breakers and Religion Makers” (December 12, 1959); and “Scholarship and Piety” in *Faith and Doubt* (Ktav, 1971), 212–246. My thanks to R. Dr. Stuart Halpern for his assistance in locating these references.

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