

In Memory of Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm: Some Personal Reflections

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On July 15, 1979, Dr. Lamm rose in the sanctuary of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun on the Upper East Side of Manhattan to eulogize Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein. He began as follows: "I feel woefully inadequate to the task of speaking the eulogy for my teacher, my colleague, and my friend, Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein. In truth there is only one person who could do justice to this occasion in honor of Rabbi Joseph Lookstein, and that is – Rabbi Joseph Lookstein. Who else but that master orator could compose the proper farewell for so distinguished a man?"

Almost fourteen years later, on April 25, 1993, Dr. Lamm delivered a *hesped* for Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in the Nathan Lamport Auditorium of Yeshiva University. He began as follows: "Surely such a prince and such a giant, who became a legend in his own lifetime, deserves an appropriate eulogy. I therefore begin with a confession: I feel uncomfortable and totally inadequate in the role of the one delivering a eulogy for my *rebbe*, the Rav. Only one person could possibly have done justice to this task and that is – the Rav himself; everyone and anyone else remains a *maspid she-lo ke-halakhah*."

Surely, Dr. Lamm's sentiment is, *kal va-homer*, more relevant today. Who else but Dr. Norman Lamm would be able to capture, with rabbinic depth and homiletical virtuosity, with thoughtful perspective and clever turns of phrase, the greatness and the contribution of Dr. Norman Lamm?

Dr. Lamm was a distinguished leader of American Orthodoxy for more than six decades.

Visionary leader and gifted orator, multi-faceted intellectual and powerful thinker, imbued with hasidic sensitivity and endowed with intellectual rigor, Dr. Lamm devoted his life to the Jewish community. One verse in the biblical book that bears his name, Nahum, describes Dr. Lamm's tenacious and passionate efforts on behalf of our community. "Man the guard posts, watch the road, gird your strength, and gather much vigor" (Nahum 2:2). In a lifetime of service to the Jewish people and, in particular, the Orthodox community, Dr. Lamm has manned the guard posts of our tradition, carefully watched the road taken by American Jewry to ensure that it reflects Jewish values, girded his prodigious intellectual strength, and gathered his vigor to make certain that his generation, our generation, and generations yet unborn will enjoy a meaningful Jewish future. This was the story of our Reb Nahum's life.

The *Yerushalmi* in *Berakhot* (3:1, end) recounts an interesting, and on the face of it, strange exchange:

רבי יוחנן שאל לר' ינאי קומי ערסיה דר' שמואל בן יוצדק, הקדיש עולתו לבדק הבית - מהו?

The question is a technical one in הלכות קדשים. In the words of the פני משה commentary, אם נתפסת קדושת בדק הבית בעולה שהיא קדשי המזבח.

There are two kinds of sanctity, that of objects consecrated for the upkeep on the *Beit ha-Mikdash* (קדשי מזבח) and that of objects consecrated to the Altar (קדשי בדק הבית) (see *Mishnah Temurah* 7:1). The issue here is whether a קדשי מזבח that is inherited with עולה can be also be sanctified with קדשי בדק הבית. But why is this question being asked קומי ר' שמואל בן יוצדק, ערסיה דר' שמואל בן יוצדק, in front of the bier, at the funeral of ר' שמואל בן יוצדק? What a strange question to be raised at precisely that moment?

In a eulogy delivered for Israeli Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yizhak Isaac Halevi Herzog in 1959, Rabbi Bezalel Zolty suggested an answer that I believe is very relevant to us at this moment. There are people, he said, whose minds are so powerful, and whose capacity for intellectual achievement so great, that they could contribute an enormous amount to the world were they to devote their full attention to the world of the spirit, engaging fully and exclusively as an עולה which is כולו לה'. But sometimes they are מקדיש their status of עולה to the בדק הבית, to the needs of the community. Is this an appropriate mode of behavior, asked Rabbi Yohanan to Rabbi Yannai at that special moment.

But sometimes, like in the case of Dr. Lamm, it is not an either-or proposition. Dr. Lamm was both, writing hundreds of articles and dozens of books addressed to the world of the spirit while directly and passionately addressing the real needs of our community. He did both, and compromised neither, and we are all the beneficiaries of his ongoing contributions.

Much will be said and written in the coming weeks and months assessing the scope and depth of Dr. Lamm's contributions to the ideology and major institutions of the Modern

Orthodox community. Much will be said and written expressing appreciation for his many contributions – intellectual and practical – to contemporary Jewish life. My reflections here will be personal, reflecting on the impact that Dr. Lamm had on my own life for which I am, and will be, everlastingly grateful.

When I was growing up, Dr. Lamm's name was mentioned with great respect in my parental home. My father, Rabbi Herschel Schacter z"l, spoke about him with profound admiration, and took great pride in the fact that he had a part in Dr. Lamm's decision to leave the field of chemistry and devote his life to the Jewish community. Indeed, Dr. Lamm confirmed to me a number of times his *hakarat ha-tov* to my father for this. I have a feeling that this may be part of the reason why he took a special interest in me and extended himself to help me many times.

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 Dr. Lamm for embodying what I aspired to become, a pulpit rabbi and engaged communal leader who was, simultaneously, a serious academic scholar. I, too, wanted to have an impact as a pulpit rabbi both within my shul as well as in the community at large, like him, and also to contribute in meaningful ways to the world of Jewish scholarship, like him. I wanted to speak like him, to write like him, and to deliver thoughtful and articulate talks, like him.

In 1981, I assumed the position of rabbi of The Jewish Center, where Rabbi Lamm had served as rabbi with great distinction for some seventeen years. On my first Shabbat I was handed the text of the Prayer for the Government of Israel about two minutes before I was to recite it. I looked at it, and it was unlike anything I had ever seen before. I had no time to reflect on it; I was expected to read it momentarily. I did what I had to do and then approached Dr. Lamm after davening for an explanation. He told me that this version was the one found in the Singer Prayer Book and recited throughout the British Empire, and that he preferred it because it omitted any reference to the State of Israel using messianic language, which he felt was inappropriate. He referred me to his exchange on this matter with Rabbi Shubert Spero that appeared in the journal *Sh'ma* a number of years earlier. I responded by saying that I was unfamiliar with this version, had never seen it before, and that I preferred the more familiar version authored by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel that was recited in most synagogues. I will never forget what he told me. "Rabbi Schechter (he never pronounced my name "Schacter"), you are now the rabbi of this shul. The decision is yours, and I will support you whatever you decide to do." It was my first Shabbat. I was 30 years old. I was totally overwhelmed by my new position. I was daunted by the prospect of speaking to the congregation with a most distinguished lay leadership, with Dr. Lamm sitting in the pews in front of me and the Rabbi Emeritus of the shul, Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung z"l, sitting on the *bimah* behind me. But Dr. Lamm told me that I was the rabbi and that he would support me. What he told me then was invaluable to me and I am forever grateful to him.

Over the years I benefited greatly from Dr. Lamm's *hesed*. At the beginning of my tenure as rabbi of The Jewish Center I struggled with my sermon delivery and Dr. Lamm graciously offered to help me. Quietly and sensitively, under just four eyes, he shared with me several practical suggestions on the art of sermon-giving that were extremely helpful to me. I remember them well, all these years later. I still regularly implement them myself and also share them repeatedly with my students. Later, he honored me with *berakhot* at the weddings of his children. He appointed me Director of YU's Torah u-Madda Project and Founding Editor of YU's new *Torah U-Madda Journal*, both of which were important steps for me in my career.

I want to note something, in particular, that may be considered relatively insignificant but that has had a great impact upon me, and that is the license plate he had on his YU car. For a long time I was mystified by it. Why "CJSSL?" And then, one day, I got it. It represented the initials of his children, Chaye, Josh, Shalom, and Sarah z"l Lamm. There is an expression sometimes used in English to describe one's core values, and that is "a bumper sticker." For example, in seeking to determine what is most important to a person, someone is asked, "What is your bumper sticker?" And at that moment, and ever since, I realized that Dr. Lamm's "bumper sticker," literally, is his children.

We all know that, regretfully, on more occasions than we want to acknowledge, leaders neglect their own children as they devote their energies to a myriad of worthy causes outside of their homes. I tell my students all the time, all the time, "Don't slaughter your children on the altar of the Jewish community." And what I admire most about Dr. Lamm, לאחר ככלות הכל, even more than his formidable communal accomplishments in countless areas which, to be sure, I admired a great deal, is the relationship he had with his children, with their children, and, now with *their* children, the fourth generation in his and Mrs. Lamm's family. I have the privilege of knowing his children, some very well, and know how devoted they were to him, and to their mother z"l. I have the privilege of knowing a number of his grandchildren, some very well, and am overwhelmed by the love and affection they have always had for their "*zaydih*" (in good Galitzyaner pronunciation, of course). This, for me, is the most amazing achievement of a life led with meaning.

The last years were difficult, very difficult, and painfully diminished. I went to visit the Lamm apartment on Central Park West and 88th Street a number of times, mostly before Rosh Hashanah 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 of his, 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 Klal 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 Klal 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 are beaming. I am crying.

Right before I left the Jewish Center in June, 2000, I asked Dr. Lamm to deliver a public lecture there on a Shabbat morning. He began by saying that he felt he had little choice but to accept my invitation because, after all, I was a *shechter* (a ritual slaughterer, a pun on my last name based on its Yiddish and Hebrew pronunciation) and he was a *lamm* (pun on lamb, his last name).

Indeed, this *shechter* has always had the utmost respect and affection for this *lamm*. Like his many admirers, I have appreciated how his "**royal reach**" has embraced those who have both "**faith and doubt**," and how the profundity of his teachings has illuminated many of the "**seventy faces**" of Judaism, especially "**Torah Umadda**." His thoughtful writings have contributed to our understanding of both Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin's "**Torah lishmah**" as well as "**the religious thought of Hasidism**." His works have constructed a "**hedge of roses**" protecting and enhancing the "**treasury of tradition**," the "**halakhot ve-halikhhot**" of Jewish life, lore, and practice. Collectively, they comprise a "**library of Jewish law and ethics**," constituting a "**royal table**" bedecked with the bounty of traditional Judaism and serving as guides to contemporary Jewish life. In a lifetime of service to *Klal Yisrael*, this "**man of faith and vision**" has valiantly toiled to insure that the members of the Jewish community appreciate the "**festivals of their faith**," and model the values of a "**good society**," always governed by the value of "**shema**" or respectful listening. His many written works as well as his first orally delivered "**derashot le-dorot**," have created "**festivals of Jewish faith**" and serve as enduring testaments to the relevance and vitality of traditional Judaism.

מורינו הרב נחום בן ר' מאיר שמואל, תהא נשמתו צרורה בצרור החיים.