LEHRHAUS Over Shabbat

Aharei Mot

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Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing a variety of articles to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.

THE CUSTOMS OF SEFIRAH AREN'T ABOUT MOURNING. THEY ARE ABOUT QUARANTINE

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The protocols of quarantine, brought on by the Coronavirus, eerily align with the traditional customs of *sefirah* (the period between Pesach and Shavuot). The "Sefirah Beard" (see *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayim* 493:2) finds its match in the rise of Quarantine Beard; the Jewish prohibition on haircuts (*id*.) finds surreal echo in the closing of salons (and in protest signs demanding "I Need a Haircut!"). There are few weddings (*idem*. 1), which for reasons of safety, logistics, and temperament, are almost universally postponed; and the mass shuttering of bars, music halls, and concert venues has temporarily terminated all live music (*Magen Avraham* 493:1).

Traditionally, *sefirah* customs have been understood as signs of *mourning*, through which we grieve Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students who died in a pandemic of the illness known as *askara* (often identified as diphtheria). The classic account of their death appears in *Yevamot* 62b, and the very first record of these customs, by an unnamed Gaon (*Teshuvot Ha-Ge'onim: Sha'arei Teshuvah* 278), interprets these prohibitions as acts of mourning for these deaths. Indeed, such customs of restraint -- initially a ban against weddings, but eventually against parties, live music, haircuts, and shaving -- do mirror classic *aveilut* observances after a family loss (see *Shulhan Arukh Yoreh Deah* 380:1, 391).

But, our current quarantine reality opens a new avenue for interpreting the character, spirit, and even details of the *sefirah* customs. Perhaps we aren't mourning the deaths caused by that mass illness. Perhaps we are *reliving the quarantine-like effects* of that mass illness.

As we know from common sense and from our own current reality, when tens of thousands are succumbing to a mysterious disease, who could possibly throw a big wedding bash? And who would even attend one? As the economy shutters and social life dwindles (and even yeshivas sit empty from their once boisterous students) there is less of a need for grooming and less of an opportunity to make exciting new purchases. Instinct alone would severely limit our public gatherings.

Indeed, Rabbinic teaching from the Talmudic period would itself respond to the R. Akiva plague by demanding quarantine conditions: "If there is plague in the city, gather in your feet (i.e. stay home), as it says (Exodus 12:2, about the Smiting of the First Born), 'and none of you shall leave the door of your house until morning!'" (*Bava Kamma* 60b). Even for *Hazal*, the proper response to an epidemic is a pause on public celebration, gathering, and the conducting of business as usual.

Each and every year, when spring arrives, our customs demand that we place ourselves back in that historical moment, and react accordingly. Ritualistically, a plague has arrived in the city, and we both react to and establish that fact through our various limits on weddings, gatherings, live music, new purchases, and grooming. We don't mourn the effects of a plague that once happened; we relive the effects of a plague as it "again" happens.

In either paradigm, *sefirah* practices commemorate the catastrophic loss of R. Akiva's students. The question is *how* we commemorate it: through ritualized mourning ("it's like they just died!"), or through ritualized quarantine ("it's like they are still dying!"). Indeed, the latter framework offers several advantages and helps explain a number of otherwise difficult features of the practice.

1. Relevance to the Talmudic Narrative

The quarantine hypothesis explains some of the emphases and values that are present in the initial R. Akiva story, in a way that the mourning hypothesis does not. The Talmud reports, "R. Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of students in an area of land that stretched from Gevat to Antipatris, and they all died in one period of time … around Pesach to Shavuot ... because they did not treat each other with respect … They all died a bad death … From *askara*." Note that the deaths are specifically from an illness; that the illness appears to be communicable, spreading across multiple towns (Gevat to Antipatris) via the threads of a particular social network (R. Akiva's students), causing a glut of deaths in a few weeks, and that close-knit individuals are liable to infect each other (12,000 "pairs" of students). Also note that a specific vice -- lack of interpersonal respect -- is identified as the spiritual cause of the tragedy.

Sefirah as mourning is oblivious to these details. The Talmud could have described any form of death, amongst any group of nationally significant figures, composed of pairs or of stand alone individuals, in any geographic range, over any length of time, due to any moralistically relevant spiritual reason -- and traditions of mourning would be an apt response. (For a contrived

counterexample: "24,000 heads of separate yeshivas in Jerusalem died in the spring, over two hundred years, from Roman persecution, because they failed to protect the sanctity of Shabbat." Generic customs of mourning would fit this counter-narrative just as well.) *Sefirah* as quarantine, however, reckons with the details. For a narrative that highlights the communicable and pandemic elements of this disaster, a tradition of quarantining is a bespoke fit. For a moral epidemic of people who can't interact respectfully, we find a potently appropriate *midah k-neged midah* (measure for measure) response in enforced social distancing.

2. **Prohibiting "*Mitzvah*" Weddings**

When mourning a deceased relative, one is permitted to marry if additional *mitzvot* are thereby fulfilled. The classic case is that of a groom who has yet to produce children. The Torah *mitzvah* of *peru u-revu* (be fruitful and multiply) compels a wedding and overrides the mourning practices which it would otherwise prohibit (*Shulhan Arukh Yoreh Deah* 392:2). Mysteriously, no such distinction exists in regard to *sefirah* practices, such that we are more restrictive during *sefirah* than during an actual situation of family loss! Indeed, Bah (*Orah Hayim* 493:1), *Arukh ha-Shulhan* (493:2), and *Mishnah Berurah* (493:1) all acknowledge this discrepancy without offering a resolution. However, it is only a discrepancy within the *sefirah* as mourning paradigm. Quarantine conditions make no such distinction, as we know all too well from current experience. The closing of venues, collapse of safe travel, logistical headaches, and medical concerns mean that no wedding of any kind can be fully celebrated -- even if the groom has yet to fulfill *peru u-revu.*

3. Lag ba-Omer & Celebration

The precise origins of Lag ba-Omer as a mini-holiday remains unknown. The earliest written accounts identify the date as when the R. Akiva plague and its associated deaths finally ceased. (See *Sefer Ha-Manhig*, *Erusin ve-Nissuin* 106; indeed, Meiri to *Yevamot* 62a considers this fact a tradition from the *Geonim*.) More than just the end of a sad period, the plague's pause was soon understood as demanding active joy and celebration, and thus a minor festival (see *Darkhei Moshe* 493:1,3 and 131:7).

In the *sefirah* as mourning paradigm, the Lag ba-Omer construct is an awkward fit. First, mourning commences and persists *after* death. The fact that the students ceased to pass away on Lag ba-Omer should trigger some continuation, if not the start, of mourning -- and certainly not the pause, or end, or mourning. More broadly, as a joyful holiday with its own customs of festive gathering and live music, Lag ba-Omer represents a kind of slap in the face to the mourning process. It is unprecedented and imprudent to conclude a period of mourning with joyful celebration. Yet again, *sefirah* as quarantine resolves this tension, as the appropriate (and expected!) reaction to the end of lengthy quarantine is celebration and gathering. The illness is over! The restaurants and theaters again open! I can see my friends! If a day comes (please God soon) when we have absolute indication that Corona quarantine is no longer

necessary, festivity would immediately ensue. Ritualistically, we relive this moment on the holiday of Lag ba-Omer.

4. **Who Observes?**

Mourning customs are limited to close relatives of the deceased. The entire halakhic framework is rooted in family relationship and obligation. The broader community has a role, (most fundamentally, providing comfort) which is limited and distinct. That 24,000 students suddenly passed is certainly worthy of commemoration, but the family-centric framework of mourning is a clunky choice. If one were to recreate the conditions of the R. Akiva plague, many families would be immersed in *shivah* rites -- but many would not be. Yet there is no indication that *sefirah* customs are reserved for particular groups, nor is a distinction created between direct mourners and less-affected comforters. Additionally, children do not mourn after a family death, even if they are of educable age *(Shulhan Arukh Yoreh Deah* 396:3), yet minors are implicated in *sefirah* observance (see *Peninei Halakhah*, *Zemanim* 3:6; Eliyahu Goldberg, *Piskei Shemuot* p. 62).

I acknowledge two possible resolutions to these problems, one more plausible than the other. First, there is a halakhic notion of mourning exceptional Torah sages, which could be operating in regard to R. Akiva's learned students. But this is quite limited (e.g. one's direct and primary Rabbi or the *Nasi*; see *Shulhan Arukh Yoreh Deah* 374:10,11) and we know neither the names nor the greatness of R. Akiva's students. If anything, the plague narrative explicitly condemns and disqualifies them from this already rare category of mourning. Second, perhaps *sefirah's* universal observance finds precedent in the mourning customs of Tishah be-Av, the Three Weeks, and the Nine Days, which likewise make no distinction between direct and in-direct mourners and also includes educable minors. However, this expansive mourning is for the preeminent national catastrophe: the *Beit ha-Mikdash's* destruction. It is possible -- though still somewhat ungainly -- that *sefirah* triggers a mourning similarly intense as that for Judaism's *sui generis* disaster.

Sefirah as quarantine requires no such investigation. Quarantine affects all members of the community, regardless of kin-relationship or age. In times of pandemic, close family are mourning, but all are quarantining. (Indeed, perhaps the Three Weeks structure is itself best understood not as mourning, but as recreating the quarantine-like social effects of Jerusalem under siege. I leave this for further study, and point readers to *Birkei Yosef* 551:15.)

5. **Calendar Diversity**

When are *sefirah* practices observed? Oddly, there is little consensus on this fundamental question. Some observe for the entire Omer period; others until Lag ba-Omer; others until Lad ba-Omer (the 34th day); others state that any stretch of 33 days suffices; some observe from the end of Nissan until the 3rd of Sivan; others start in Iyar and end right before Shavuot; some persist through the entire period, taking numerous quick breaks along the way (see *Magen Avraham* 493:5, and in general *Peninei Halakhah*, *Zemanim* 3:2).

Certainly, this diversity is due in part to the decentralized and relatively late spread of these customs across Diaspora communities, and to the dark influence of the Crusades, which led various Ashkenazi communities to focus on the latter half of spring. Nonetheless, the effect is extraordinary: there is no seasonal or holiday practice with nearly this scale of calendar diversity. Indeed, this phenomenon contrasts starkly with the classic mourning framework (e.g. *shivah*, *shloshim*) and its clearly defined calendar of milestones. However, within the *sefirah* as quarantine model, this apparent "bug" sublimates into a feature. Contemporary experience attests that quarantines rarely have one clear start or end date. Different communities, facing different challenges and under different leadership styles, will enter and leave quarantine at different dates within the same rough season.

So, why do we customarily ban weddings, parties, music, haircuts, and shaving during the *sefirah*? Traditionally, these practices have been understood as ritualistic mourning for R. Akiva's 24,000 students who died in a plague. But the Corona experience shows that each of these bans can be understood as reliving the social effects of said plague. Loosely speaking, we aren't enacting mourning, we are enacting quarantine. Indeed, the quarantine model offers five advantages: it more directly relates to the details of the R. Akiva narrative and the sin of social disharmony; it explains the severity of the wedding ban, it pairs more seamlessly with the Lag ba-Omer holiday, it makes sense of why everyone (non-family, minors) observes, and it accounts for the wide range of views as to when in the calendar these bans maintain.

One of the few silver linings in this difficult time is a renewed appreciation for Jewish community. Quarantine has stripped us of synagogues, *simhahs,* and neighborly Shabbat meals, and I for one now realize with extra fondness the gift that is my vibrant sacred community. Every year, we undergo a ritualized, small-scale version of this social distancing. We relive the pandemic that struck a school of students who could not live together in peace, so as to best prepare ourselves for appreciating our covenantal community. Together, we count again towards that day on which all Israel stood at Sinai "as one person, with one heart" (Rashi, *Exodus* 19:2).

A Return to Moderation: Rabbi Lamm's Passionate Plea for Civility

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R. Norman Lamm's reputation rightly rides on his commitment to *Torah u-Madda*. Yet throughout his life, another motif rivaled, and perhaps even eclipsed, his embrace of *Torah u-Madda*: passionate moderation. His calls for moderation and civility were among the most seminal themes in R. Lamm's sermons, lectures,

and published works.[1] Unlike *Torah u-Madda*, which became an area of major focus only after he became President of Yeshiva University, he addressed the theme of moderation throughout his time in both the rabbinate and presidency.[2] At present, many Americans have expressed deep consternation about rising incivility, especially on social media and in politics. A close consideration of R. Lamm's sustained yet evolving attention to this topic convictions can inspire efforts to remediate the current acerbic situation throughout the Western World.

This essay identifies four distinct historical stages of the evolution of the moderation motif[3] in R. Lamm's thought:

[1] See Jeffrey Saks' important recent essay, "The Extremes are More Consistent but Absurd," in *Tradition* 53:3, where he notes that "perhaps, above all, R. Lamm presented moderationism as the first among equal characteristics of Modern Orthodoxy" (211). For similar sentiments, see also R. Saul Berman's remembrance of R. Lamm in *The Commentator*, available at https://yucommentator.org/2020/06/in-memoriam-of-rabbi-lamm-a-personal-reflection-from-rabbi-saul-berman/.

[2] The theme of moderation is deeply interwoven with R. Lamm's core theological commitment to monism, the notion that all reality is ultimately unified, and is closely connected to a number of other central areas in his thought. These include his commitment to Kookian harmonism, embrace of Hasidic thought and theology, preferred model for *Torah u-Madda*, and his *derekh ha-limmud* (Torah study methodology). For a treatment of the theme of monism through the prism of his *derekh ha-limmud*, which sought to integrate Halakhah and *aggadah*, see my essay, "R. Norman Lamm's Trailblazing Talmudic Methodology."

[3] There are many other pieces in which R. Lamm addressed themes that overlap with those presented here. Many of these have been omitted from the body of the essay due to space considerations. For the interested reader, below please find a review of additional references.

For the notion that there can be too much of even the good, see "Too Much of a Good Thing" (1971), and "The Illogic of Logical Conclusions" (1973). In the latter, he sharply critiques those who attacked Rav Goren's controversial ruling regarding *mamzerim* (bastard children) by way of polemical personal attacks.

On the importance of achieving a proper balance between confrontation and conciliation, see "The Calm and the Rage" (1975). For his discussion of anger, the first of Maimonides' two exceptions to the olden Mean, see "Temper, Lost and Found" (1968). On Maimonides' other exception, humility, see "Humility: An Analysis," as well as his 1981 *Hag ha-Semikhah* address, entitled "The Self-Image of the Rabbi" (*Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, #39). He delivered an address on this topic at the 1990 Rabbinical Council of America convention.

R. Lamm returned to the theme of moderation in his 1964 sermon "*Menschlichkeit*," emphasizing that "*menschlichkeit* is the civility that comes to a man when he realizes how great he can become and ought to become, and how little of that greatness he has achieved."

On striking a balance between truth and compromise in one's religious life, in addition to "Peace and Truth: Part-Time Opponents" (1951 - mentioned in the body), see "Jacob's Peace Treaty - A Lesson for Our Times" (1952).

For R. Lamm's deeper definition of peace as inner harmony, see "A Jewish Definition of Peace" (1959).

On the theme of achieving equanimity, see "On Remaining Unperturbed" (1959) and "The Ups and Downs of Life" (1973).

On the value of partial peace in public affairs, see "Peace in Pieces" (1973), "A Piece of Peace" (1974), and "Visions of Peace" (1976).

On the balance between peace and militarism, see "Violence" (1968) and "Power and Peace" (1970).

On the theme of "sanity" and "insanity" in public affairs, see "The Call to Sanity," delivered in 1957 and, in slightly updated form, in 1960. See too his reference to society in

1. His early sermons on moderation, which appeared with regularity beginning in the early 1960s, focused on individual character development, repeatedly referring to Maimonides' Golden Mean as a foundation for explicating the importance of balancing competing values and eschewing the extremes. (Following Maimonides, R. Lamm variously referred to this as the *derekh ha-beinonit*, middle path, and the *derekh Hashem*, way of God.) His 1960s doctoral work on R. Hayyim Volozhin, whom he saw as a kindred spirit, echoed this same theme of individual moderation.

2. In the mid-1960s and 1970s, as R. Lamm became more involved in Jewish communal affairs in the United States and Israel, he extended his concern for moderation to the public domain. During this period, he expressed significant concern about the negative effects of infighting within the Orthodox community and between the various U.S. denominations, and especially about internecine religious strife and political polemics in Israel.

3. After assuming the presidency of Yeshiva University in 1976, and particularly in the 1980s, R. Lamm was subject to a series of vicious polemics from the Yeshiva world. While the attacks were personally hurtful, they ironically led him to double down on his emphasis on the importance of *derekh eretz* and civility in communal affairs. Around the same time, as he became increasingly involved in a series of attempts to forge increased collaboration between the Jewish denominations in the United States and particularly in Israel, Lamm addressed the topic of communal harmony. This period also coincided with a series of public essays and lectures in which, addressing a now-larger audience from his perch as president, Lamm sought to capture the essence of Modern Orthodoxy, or, in his then-preferred term, Centrist Orthodoxy.[4] In addition to

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his sermon "The New Morality and Ancient Egypt," delivered shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

For concerns about internecine strife within Orthodoxy, see his 1966 essay entitled "A Program for Orthodoxy" (*Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, #2), where he expresses concern that insults against fellow Jews are ruining our reputation and causing a *hillul Hashem* (desecration of God's name). For similar sentiments, see also his remarks in "Jews Against Jews" (1969).

[4] See Zev Eleff, *Modern Orthodox Judaism*, 348-350; see also 354-5, 364-7.

Torah u-Madda, Lamm singled out passionate moderation and love of fellow Jews as hallmarks of his community's core values.[5]

4. Finally, as Israeli political debates over land for peace reached a boiling point in the 1990s, R. Lamm spoke out against the rise of religious extremism, pleaded for civility, and, following the Rabin assassination, called for communal self-introspection. Perceiving a frightening rise in religious extremism in Israel and throughout the world, he urged his audiences to accept responsibility for recovering the values of love, respect, and simple civility as antidotes to a society he saw as deeply ailing.

Early Sermons: Personal Moderation

In his early sermons, R. Lamm centered this theme of moderation on the plane of individual character development. In his 1951 sermon "Peace and Truth: Part-Time Opponents", in what he indicates was his first sermon at Kehilath Jeshurun - making it his first ever professional sermon - a young R. Lamm explored the balance between truth and compromise in one's religious life.

In 1956, he explored this motif in a Sukkot sermon entitled "Extreme Moderation." At that time, he noted, moderation and civility were highly valued in society, arguably to a fault. Lamm therefore emphasized the inverse, namely that while living a life of moderation is laudatory, we must avoid paralysis and act firmly on our religious convictions. Otherwise, like Lot's wife, we run the risk of becoming frozen pillars of salt. That R. Lamm began his career by exhorting his community not to be satisfied with mere moderation, and concluded his career by pleading for a return to moderation, is one striking way of summarizing the story this essay seeks to tell.

To the best of my knowledge, his 1961 talk entitled "A Sermon for the Sensitive" introduced the Golden Mean to his audience for the first time. The *derekh ha-beinonit*, he explained, meant that we should strive to avoid either extreme. He therefore urged his congregants to "walk the path of moderation and keep away from the extreme of hypersensitivity as well as from the other extreme of insensitivity." Because most of us err on the side of sensitivity, we should devote the lion's share of our efforts toward developing a thick skin - or, as he put it homiletically, to donning the leather of the Leviathan. R. Lamm's citation of the Golden Mean in this sermon anticipated his lifelong advocacy for adopting and explicating Maimonides' characterological middle path.

[5] He emphasized the theme of *ahavat Yisrael* in many published lectures and essays. For his halakhic analysis, see "Loving and Hating Jews as Halakhic Categories," *Tradition* 24:2, 98-122, also published in Hebrew in his *Halakhot va-Halikhot*.

In his 1962 "Frankness as Vice and Virtue," R. Lamm again referenced Maimonides' Golden Mean. He pointed to R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin's interpretation that from the moment they met, Isaac and Rebekah's relationship was rooted in reverence and did not permit open dialogue, even about crucial subjects such as the character of their children Yaakov and Esav.[6] From here Lamm concluded that it is exceedingly important to build and maintain an open line of communication in interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, he counseled, "excessive frankness is… a vice and not a virtue." He astutely added that "when a friend begins a conversation with the words, 'to be brutally frank…' you may be sure that he intends brutality more than frankness."

In his 1965 sermon "Sincerely Yours," echoing his remarks on frankness three years prior, R. Lamm yet again urged his congregants to strike a healthy balance between the extremes. On the one hand, he suggested, sincerity is an essential trait in interpersonal relationships. At the same time, indiscriminately sharing whatever is on one's mind is equally inadvisable. To restrain ourselves from sharing everything we know in order to avoid misinterpretation, or out of respect for others' feelings, "is an act of civility, not insincerity."

By 1966, judging by one of his most programmatic sermons, "Sweet, Sour, and Salty," Lamm had worked out a fairly well-developed theory of moderation. He set forth his basic notion immediately. "Judaism counsels moderation," he insisted, "and rejects extremism." After again reviewing Maimonides' Golden Mean, he raised the obvious question: Does this mean that Maimonides was recommending a half-hearted approach to Judaism, in which one should adopt only partial observance of *mitzvot* such as Shabbat, *kashrut*, and Yom Kippur? Obviously, this was not the case. What exactly, then, did Maimonides have in mind when counseling moderation? R. Lamm explained that the *derekh ha-beinonit* governed one's interactions with others, not one's ideals or core values:

> In matters of character and personality, in developing the traits wherewith one reacts to the world, in teaching oneself personal habits, there must be only the Golden Mean and one must keep a healthy distance away from extremes. But when it comes to principle, to ideals and philosophy and commitments, to a code rather than a mode of conduct—then only the vision of truth may guide us. And truth is radical; sometimes it will lead us to a middle position, more often to one extreme or the other…

Accordingly, he continued,

> Even people with extreme views must express them moderately. In articulating the truth, in living by it,

[6] *Ha'amek Davar*, Genesis 24:65 s.v. *va-Tikakh*. See also ibid. 24:62 s.v. *ve-Yizhak* and 24:64 s.v. *va-Tissa*.

> I must always consider others: their conditions and their sensitivities. My opinion may be unpopular, but my presentation of it ought to be non-repulsive.[7]

Around the same time that he delivered a number of these sermons, R. Lamm was writing his dissertation, completed in 1966, on *Torah lishmah* (Torah study for its own sake) in the thought of R. Hayyim Volozhin and his contemporaries.

According to Lamm, R. Hayyim departed from his teacher the Vilna Gaon's anti-Hasidic polemics primarily due to R. Hayyim's personal inclination toward moderation. Notwithstanding his firm ideological disagreements with the nascent Hasidic movement in theoretical matters, Lamm observed, "R. Hayyim was a man of moderation who did not allow himself to develop personal antagonisms towards the Hasidim" (*Torah Lishmah* 9). In refusing to sign a ban against the Hasidim, R. Hayyim was "an island of sanity, equanimity, and courtesy in a raging ocean of rancor, recriminations, and rudeness" (12).

Considering the vituperative attacks that R. Lamm had sustained by the time of the 1989 publication of the English version of *Torah Lishmah* (the Hebrew version had been published in 1972[8]), his further observation that "R. Hayyim retained his equanimity despite some provocations by unscrupulous… extremists who resorted to base methods in order to malign him" (13) reads as equal parts biography and autobiography. As Lamm put it elsewhere, adding a reference that partly explains his lifelong affinity for the founder of Habad: "It was only the appearance of two distinguished personalities - R. Shneur Zalman of Ladi on the Hasidic side and R. Hayyim Volozhiner on the Mitnagdic - that stilled the controversy and allowed the debate to proceed in civil fashion. Both were passionate spokesmen for their receptive points of view, but both operated as moderates in the best sense of the word" (*Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, 59).

Communal Moderation

R. Lamm's interest in R. Hayyim, whose personal moderation was manifest primarily in his public activities, coincided with a shift that emerged beginning in the second half of the 1960s. During this period, Lamm extended his emphasis on moderation from the realm of individual character to the public sphere. He had begun visiting Israel more regularly and became more heavily involved in a number of initiatives aimed at building bridges between the Israeli and

[7] R. Lamm went on to offer a homiletic interpretation of the Torah's requirement that we add salt to sacrifices: "Ideals must always follow the vision of אמת, of truth. But even then, even when we follow truth without compromise, we must keep it flavored, we must season it with a bit of salt. We must see to it that the truth we serve up is neither bland nor harsh. Salt, unlike sweet or sour additives, is not essentially a flavor added from without; rather, it enhances the flavor inherent in the food itself, it brings out the best within it. So the salt of the sacrifice, symbol of the attitude we must bring to Torah: it reveals the inner beauty of Torah itself."

[8] As to the delayed publication of the English version, Lamm explained that it was due to a combination of new scholarship that had emerged in the interim, including constructive criticisms posed by leading scholars in the field, coupled with his onerous responsibilities as President (*Torah Lishmah*, Introduction, xiv-xv).

diaspora communities. His sometimes-frustrating experiences led him to express significant concern regarding rising tensions in Israel.

He shared these worries as early as 1965 in his sermon "Confrontation: A Parable," in which Lamm pointed to rising religious hostility and a new *kulturkampf* in Israel:

> Irritations and hostilities between the Orthodox and anti-Orthodox element are growing all too rapidly. To a large extent, denunciation has taken the place of argumentation, and enmity has begun to replace amity in Israeli society. Sometimes differences of opinion are a challenge and a spur to greater creativity. Unfortunately, this does not appear to be the case at present; instead, Israel is threatened by the long-dreaded "Kulturkampf…"
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> It therefore becomes incumbent upon us as Orthodox Jews, indeed upon all Jews through all the world, Jews of all persuasions, to transform the confrontation to dialogue, the "Kulturkampf" to cultural co-existence, and to substitute education for altercation.

He concluded with an exquisite homiletical move, noting that the Talmudic principle of *kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba-zeh*, all Jews are responsible for one another, is taken in a Hasidic homily to derive from the word "*arev*," sweet. If we wish to successfully bear mutual responsibility without alienating our brethren, we must begin by adopting a kind disposition that emphasizes our commonalities, not our differences.

His 1966 sermon "The Things that Unite Us" turned to the relationship between the U.S. Orthodox and non-Orthodox communities. Rejecting the two extremes of separation and indifference, R. Lamm called for cooperation with the non-Orthodox while simultaneously acknowledging the two groups' fundamentally irreconcilable differences.

In his 1969 sermon "Confrontation: When, Where, and How," following a decade-and-a-half of Civil Rights struggles, and less than a year after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Lamm outlined the situations in which public contestation was appropriate and inappropriate.[9] He began by observing that "a distinguishing mark of our age is what has been called 'The Politics of Confrontation' - the face-to-face encounter with forces considered immoral and corrupt, an encounter which leads to a test of will and endurance until one side wins." This took the place of "the older and more enlightened, more patient, and more rational methods that have

[9] For his remarks on the assassination of King, see his sermon "The New Morality and Ancient Egypt."

generally made our democracy viable and famous: persuasion, compromise, petition, accommodation, and majority rule with minority rights."

Even where confrontation was deemed necessary, he insisted, "verbal onslaught" and "ego involvement" have no place; these tactics and motivations run the risk of making the situation "irreversible by hardening positions" - an insight that resonates in today's polarized environment. He cited a remark by Professor Cassuto to the effect that Moses demonstrated shrewd emotional intelligence by softening his message to Pharaoh: whereas Moses initially delivered his message in the name of "the God of Israel," which suggests a large, threatening nation, he subsequently modified his words to involve "the God of the Hebrews," an equally accurate but more modest formulation that proved less frightening to the Egyptian potentate. Such emotional intelligence in engaging with our interlocutors, Lamm suggested, would serve us very well today.

Five months later, R. Lamm discussed a variation on the same theme of open-minded confrontation in "The Ethics of Controversy," exploring the Mishnah in *Avot* that upholds Hillel and Shamai as exemplars of a dispute for the sake of heaven. By being "valiant advocates of differing opinions" who were willing to reconsider their opinions in the face of intellectual critique, "Hillel and Shammai teach us that we must be vigorous in the pursuit of our ideas, but never stubborn; resolute, but never relentless; incorruptible, but never immovable."

In 1971, Lamm returned to the theme of mutual respect in Israeli society. In his sermon "The Religious Situation in Israel," he did not hesitate to note that "the politicization of religion is responsible, in large measure, for the alienation of many non-observant Jews from Torah."

This anticipated one of his major sermons on the subject of unity in Israel, aptly entitled "Kulturkampf," which he delivered upon returning from a 1972 visit to Israel. He opened his remarks:

> Last year, when I last spoke of the religious situation in Israel, I expressed the hope that Israel would not be afflicted with a Kulturkampf. Today, after my most recent visit to the State of Israel, I must express the hope that we can emerge from it intact. Because we are well into it…

Observing that sometimes Israelis' desire to fight was even greater than the gravity of the issues at hand, R. Lamm wryly noted that while the issues were indeed serious, "the Kulturkampf seem[ed] to be more kampf than kultur."

Civility and Moderationism in the Face of Public Attacks

Fast forward to the 1980s, and the divisions had come closer to home. Beset by a series of savage attacks by prominent Orthodox leaders and in the

Orthodox press,[10] Lamm not only continued calling for moderation and civility, but he also began warning against the rise of extremism. Not coincidentally, it was during this period that he preferred to refer to Modern Orthodoxy as Centrist Orthodoxy, identifying the latter with a principled embrace of moderation that he termed "moderationism."

In his address at the 1981 *Hag ha-Semikhah* (Ordination Convocation), "The Self-Image of the Rabbi" (reprinted in *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, #39), he focused on the proper balance between meekness and self-confidence among emerging rabbinic leaders. He went on to note the danger of what he called "the rising extremism in our times" (114), stressing the critical importance of cultivating "radical moderation" among emerging rabbinic leaders (115).[11]

In 1985, on the occasion of the fiftieth yahrtzeit of Rav Kook, R. Lamm delivered a number of lectures in which he stressed the balance between the new and old in the thought of Rav Kook. Lesser thinkers were not able to harmonize these two polarities, but it was precisely Rav Kook's greatness that enabled him to achieve this greater harmony.[12] R. Lamm further noted that while Rav Kook was the subject of unyielding, scurrilous attacks from his critics, he refused to "take the bait" and respond to his critics.[13] As with his comments regarding R. Hayyim of Volozhin, it is hard to shake the sense that R. Lamm's remarks regarding Rav Kook were at once biographical and autobiographical.

R. Lamm returned to the moderation theme toward the end of his remarks in his seminal RIETS Centennial address in 1986, later published under

[10] See, for example, "Gifter Slaughters Lamm for Passover," reprinted in Eleff, *Modern Orthodox Judaism*, 355-8.

Saks (ibid.) notes: "By the late 1980s R. Lamm was being pilloried for his advocacy of these values from the mouthpieces of the Agudath Israel, and even, in a more muted fashion, from within more traditionalist corners of YU itself. On Passover 1988 the venerable Telz Rosh Yeshiva, R. Mordechai Gifter, targeted R. Lamm in a speech that came to be known as 'Gifter Slaughters Lamm for Passover.' At the same time, the Agudah's right-wing magazine The Jewish Observer ran two columns penned by Prof. Aaron D. Twerski, attacking R. Lamm's centrism for "giving the appearance of dealing with Conservative and Reform leaders with deference and dignity" (see https://agudah.org/wp-content/uploads/1988/07/JO1988-V21-N05.pdf). A few years earlier an unsigned editorial in that same publication cynically required a true centrist to "be equally accommodating to both extremes, or equally negative toward them both."

[11] According to a JTA report, by 1979 Lamm was already speaking out against what he referred to as the "intolerant fragmentation which endangers the continued vitality and creativity of the Orthodox Jewish community in the United States." See https://www.jta.org/archive/lamm-attacks-fragmentization-among-orthodox-jews-in-u-s.

[12] For important relevant discussions of Rav Kook's theology, see Lamm's "Harmonism, Novelty, and the Sacred in the Teachings of Rav Kook," *In Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*, ed. Lawrence J. Kaplan (New York: NYU Press), 1995, 159-176; and his "'Peace and Truth': Strategies for Their Reconciliation—A Meditation," in *Reverence, Righteousness, and Rahamanut: Essays in Memory of Rabbi R. Leo Jung*, ed. Jacob J. Schacter (New York: Jason Aronson), 1992, 193-199.

[13] "Harmonism, Novelty, and the Sacred," ibid.

the title “There is a Prophet in Israel” (*Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, #41). After bitterly noting the vituperative attacks hurled upon the Rashei Yeshiva at Yeshiva University, including the Rav, he proudly proclaimed: “The greatness of our Yeshiva is that we kept to our *derekh* with strength and with courage, that we conducted ourselves with individual and institutional dignity, that we refused to reciprocate petty insults and trade invectives, but continued to relate to others according to the principles of *kevod ha-beriyot* and *kevod ha-Torah*” (131-2).

A few months later, in a 1986 address to YU alumni in Israel titled “Do Not Let the Center Collapse,” delivered in conjunction with the RIETS centennial, he argued that YU alumni, if properly organized, were positioned to introduce the themes of “radical moderation” and civility into Israeli society.

> It is against the backdrop of such unjustified extremism that Yeshiva University must be seen as the standard-bearer of moderation in Jewish life. For YU stands not only for *Torah U'Mada* — a broader and more comprehensive vision of Torah as expressed in a particular curricular philosophy — but also for sanity and for moderation; for the conviction that Maimonides' “middle way” applies not only to personal dispositions and character traits, but also to communal conduct and public policy; for an appreciation that life is filled with ambiguities and complexities and resists black-and-white simplism…
>
> The advocacy of moderation should never be seen as an act of weakness. Mark Twain once said: "Moderation in all things — except moderation." The only area where we must be extreme is in the pursuit of moderation in all aspects of our communal and social life. I am in favor of "radical moderation.”

R. Lamm’s pivotal writings on Centrist Orthodoxy centered on the same themes. In “Some Comments on Centrist Orthodoxy” (*Tradition*, Fall 1986; republished in *Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, #4), he attributed three major principles to Centrist Orthodoxy: *Torah u-Madda*, moderation, and love of the Jewish people. Bemoaning the fact that “in today’s environment, true moderation appears as an aberration or, worse, a manifestation of spinelessness, a lack of commitment” (46), he exhorted his readers to recall that in fact it is a “sacred principle” (ibid.).

He acknowledged that some may contend that Maimonides’ middle path is limited only to individual character. Yet he rejected this view on the basis of a number of arguments. First, prima facie there is no reason to distinguish between the private and public levels; if anything, mass extremism is more dangerous than its individual counterpart. Second, Maimonides’ own approach to matters of public policy was characterized by

precisely the sort of level-headed balance R. Lamm advocated. Third, Lamm noted that Maimonides' biblical source for the Golden Mean was drawn from Avraham's advocacy on behalf of the people of Sodom; thus, the very source for following the middle path is drawn from a scenario of public policy! He rued the fact that "extremism is rampant… in religious life," even as he understood that the ills of secular society tempt extreme responses.[14] He acknowledged that "extremism is psychologically more satisfying and intellectually easier to handle" than Maimonidean moderation. Yet, he thundered,

> Speculate on what the reactions would be to Abraham if he were to be alive today, in the 1980's, pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah. Placards would no doubt rise on every wall of Jerusalem: "*shomu shamayim al zot*…", the scandal of a purportedly Orthodox leader daring to speak out on behalf of the wicked evildoers and defying the opinions of all the "*Gedolim*" of our times! Emergency meetings of rabbinic organizations in New York would be convened, resulting in a statement to the press that what could one expect of a man who had stooped to a dialogue with the King of Sodom himself. Rumors would fly that the dialogue was occasioned by self-interest—the concern for his nephew Lot. American-born Neturei Karta demonstrators in Israel would parade their signs before the foreign press and TV cameras: "WASTE SODOM … NUKE GOMORRAH … ABRAHAM DOESN'T SPEAK FOR RELIGIOUS JEWRY." Halakhic periodicals would carry editorials granting that Abraham was indeed a talmid chakham, but he has violated the principle of emunat chakhamim (assumed to be the warrant for a kind of intellectual authoritarianism) by ignoring the weight of rabbinic opinion that Sodom and Gomorrah, like Amalek, must be exterminated. Indeed, what can one expect other than pernicious results from one who is well known to have flirted with Zionism…? And beyond words and demonstrations, Abraham would be physically threatened by the Kach strongmen, shaking their fists and shouting accusations of treason at him. And so on and so on. (*Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, 49)

Acknowledging that he was not in position to sway those outside the Centrist community, he insisted that we stay true to our guns: "Let others

[14] While it is not my focus in this essay, R. Lamm possessed a preternatural understanding of human nature, and well understood why he was fighting an uphill battle in his calls for moderation. For our purposes, suffice it to say that it was a battle he nonetheless thought was well worth undertaking.

do as they wish," he said. We, of our camp, must know and do better" (50).

In 1989, R. Lamm dedicated a full essay to the theme of Centrist Orthodox and moderation, or what he now preferred to call moderation*ism* (*Seventy Faces*, #5). Pushing back firmly against those who misconstrued the idea as a sorry compromise, R. Lamm argued that it was anything but - and that, in fact, the dynamic act of weighing what was made such judiciousness "the way of the Lord." Lamm cited his mentor Rav Soloveitchik's interpretation that Maimonides was not simple-mindedly requiring one to fall in the middle in each individual scenario, but rather over the course of one's life. While he was initially skeptical as to whether or not this was truly Maimonides' intent, R. Lamm observed that "one learns never to dismiss an opinion of the Rav without a great deal of thought, and three decades of such thought have borne him out" (56). As Lamm summarized the point, "The key to character for Maimonides is not the mean as such, but this weighing and measuring and directing, the conscious use of reason rather than passively following Nature blindly and supinely… The process of arriving at a determination of one's own life and character is more important than the results" (*Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, 57).

Responding to Religious Extremism

With the 1994 massacre perpetrated by Baruch Goldstein at the Tomb of the Patriarchs, and Yigal Amir's assassination of Prime Minister Rabin in 1995, the final decade of the twentieth century saw the tragic realization of R. Lamm's worst fears. His public remarks reflected a new level of urgency and, particularly in the wave of the assassination, even self-flagellation.

Lamm's 1994 *Hag ha-Semikhah* address (*Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, #43) took place just nine days after the Goldstein massacre. Alluding to the events of a week prior, he urged the newly-minted new crop of rabbis not to fall prey to religious extremists (149) and, above all, to listen to one another (151).[15]

But if the Goldstein massacre was deeply distressing for Lamm - recall that the former earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees from Yeshiva College and the Albert Einstein College of Medicine respectively - the Rabin assassination was breaking point. R. Lamm's eulogy for Rabin, and his remarks delivered at the *sheloshim*, were rife with pained, piercing calls for self-reflection and introspection on the part of the Religious Zionist and Modern Orthodox communities.

In the former (*Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, #50), Lamm acknowledged feeling not only "shock and grief," but also "a vital element of *teshuvah*… *bushah*, shame." It was, after all, a religious university student who had assassinated the Prime Minister. Lamm declared, "our responsibility is to be responsible, to recognize that violent rhetoric invariably leads to violent deeds." If we do not

[15] On the theme of listening in today's deafening world, see "Learning to Listen" (1955) and "Divine Silence or Human Static?" (1965). See also his 2002 *Hag ha-Semikhah* address, "A Perfect World," discussed later in this essay.

tamp down the rhetoric, he warned, "we stand accused of having prepared the ground for the explosion of such malevolence by people of weak restraint, like a sewer blowing its cover and uncontrollably spewing forth its odious and miasmic gases" (220-1).

Lamm placed responsibility for the assassination squarely on the shoulders of his own community:

> Let us never again, in Jerusalem or in New York or elsewhere, call a respected leader of Israel a "traitor." Let no one tolerate irresponsible individuals who dare to refer to the prime minister of Israel, no matter of what party, as a Nazi. And let us silence those raucous voices of vicious discord who declare that it is a *mitzva* to assassinate a prime minister of the State of Israel" (221)!
>
> We must develop a new sensitivity to extremism of all kinds. When I argue against uncivil speech, it is not a matter of taste or a preference for bourgeois manners. Le style c'est l'homme. Style often reveals character. We have allowed ourselves too often the luxury of intemperate, extremist expression, and we must all band together to learn how to avoid it. We must no longer be as tolerant as we have been of strident invective and ugly epithets and hurtful hype. Neither the Right nor the Left have been careful enough in gauging the temperature of debate. All of us must rethink not our positions as much as our methods. And we must develop a new respect for simple civility. (222)

In 1998 remarks[16] delivered in memory of his successor at *The Jewish Center*, Rabbi Isaac Bernstein, R. Lamm referred to what he called the Rainbow Principle, which insists that in everything there is "variation or gradations." Most people are not purely righteous or purely evil. "*Emet*," absolute truth, and "*keshet*," harmony, must coexist in the messy real world we inhabit. This may be difficult, but "God gave us brains and endowed us with both the intellect and the courage to make distinctions." We must also remain true to our own convictions "without suppressing the other party" by denying others the right to formulate dissenting opinions.

This, in essence, means that "the requirement of Judaism is moderation." We must take Maimonides' Golden Mean as our model, R. Lamm insisted. This, he stressed again, does not mean that we must mindlessly follow the "mathematical middle"; it rather means that we must use our intellect to carefully evaluate all

[16] Later published as "Modern Orthodoxy at the Brink of a New Century," *Le'ela*, Spring 1999, 8-13.

considerations, to use "intellect and judgment to make [oneself] over into a better kind of human being."

In his 1999 Yeshiva University commencement address (reprinted in *Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, #21), R. Lamm warned the graduates of rising extremism in the Jewish community and beyond, lest "mere resentment [curdle] into cold and hard hatred" (221). There was not a civil war among Jews, but an "*un*-civil war." Coining a neologism, he declared that we were no longer embroiled in "a *Kulturkampf*, a war of cultures," but in "a *Kampkultur*, a culture of war." In regard to religious collaboration across denominational lines, he counseled that it was best to be honest and acknowledge fundamental differences of opinion. Instead of speaking of unity, "a chimerical nostrum regularly invoked by organizational drum-beaters," he recommended that was most wise "to give up the ghost and speak not of unity, but of civility, respect, and cooperation" (*Commentary* Symposium 1999; reprinted in *Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, #9, 102).

Just a month-and-a-half before the turn of the century, R. Lamm delivered a Eulogy for Dr. Yosef Burg, yet a kindred spirit. Burg was an accomplished scholar who committed himself to decades of public service in the Mizrachi and Israeli government, was endowed with a razor-sharp, self-deprecating wit, and paved a middle path of moderation throughout his career. Whereas Lamm had drawn implicit comparisons between R. Hayyim and Rav Kook's lives and Lamm's personal experience, in eulogizing Dr. Burg, Lamm was explicit:

> Most of all, we shall miss him for his essential, overarching public philosophy ~ that of moderation. Believe me when I tell you from personal experience: it is difficult to be a moderate. Extremists from both sides are often relentless and indiscriminate in their attacks; and there are even more rational people who sneer and repeat the usual platitudes as if they were revelations of new critique: moderation lacks passion, compromise is undignified, it manifests a lack of principle. There is a grain of truth in these criticisms—but when offered as blanket, indiscriminate condemnations of moderation, when the attacks are immoderate, they are wrong-headed and cannot and should not be taken seriously.
>
> Such shallow assaults on the Burg policy of moderation—his most characteristic ambition in politics—did not deter him. He was a moderate both by disposition and by conviction, applying it in all phases of his activity—in religion, in politics, in government, and in society.

Even as he exceeded the quarter-century mark as President, and a half-century since he spoke on the tension between truth and peace in his first

rabbinic sermon, R. Lamm did not tire of calling on his students to model moderation and abjure extremism. In his 2002 *Hag ha-Semikhah* address entitled "A Perfect World," delivered months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks,[17] Lamm again counseled the importance of listening to one another. He averred that the Talmudic teaching that Torah scholars increase peace in the world was not descriptive but prescriptive. "Rabbanim should be initiators of peace," he cautioned, "not the instigators of strife. *Talmidei Chakhamim* should teach by example that mutual insults, disrespect, and belittlement should not necessarily accompany difference of opinion; that חילוקי דעות need not lead to מחלוקת. This is not a matter of etiquette or decorum. It is Halakha."

Conclusion

In his remarks at a 2001 event celebrating the 25th anniversary of his leadership of Yeshiva University, R. Lamm reflected on his personal experiences:

> In my work for Yeshiva, I benefited greatly from the decency and generosity of spirit of countless individuals. I also suffered בזיונות—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!) Because of the virtue of moderation and tolerance—דרכי נועם—that I learned these 50 years, I am moved to forgive those who would never forgive me. I would suffer the slings and arrows again gladly on behalf of this cause and my people, ready to be *mekabbel yisurim be'ahavah*—to embrace suffering with love—because one never tires of defending his or her home—*be'ahavah*, with love.

We inhabit the dystopia that R. Lamm foresaw and desperately sought to forestall. By all accounts, the extremism in general culture and in many quarters of the Jewish community has worsened. Yet during his lifetime, R. Lamm saw extremism replace moderation as the cultural norm. Still, R. Lamm suffered slings and arrows while insisting for over fifty years that we dare not choose between an impassioned life of divine worship and an equally passionate commitment to private and communal moderation. R. Lamm, to loosely borrow a Talmudic saying, creates an obligation on each of us, his students, to take the torch and fight extremism wherever we encounter it: among our enemies and among our fellow Jews; in America and Israel; on social media and in modern politics; and, above all, within ourselves.

It is for good reason that the Torah repudiated the unhealthy excesses of relativist indifference and

[17] R. Lamm addressed the 9/11 attacks in two presentations, one delivered on the day of the attacks and another in retrospect. The latter was published as "Twin reactions to the Twin Towers Tragedy," in Michael Broyde, ed., *Contending With Catastrophe: Jewish Perspectives on September 11th* (New York: K'hal Publishing), 2011.

hotheaded extremism. Passionate moderation is, after all, the way of the Lord.