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NASO

THIS WEEK'S LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS IS DEDICATED BY THE EDITORS
IN MEMORY OF **RABBI DR. NORMAN LAMM Z"l**,
GRANDFATHER OF FOUNDING LEHRHAUS EDITOR **ARI LAMM**
AND GRANDFATHER-IN-LAW OF LEHRHAUS EDITOR **TZVI SINENSKY**.
THROUGH HIS PERSONAL MODEL, COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP, AND SOPHISTICATED
EXPOSITION OF TORAH UMADDA AND THE IDEAL OF SYNTHESIS, DR. LAMM SET
AN INTELLECTUAL AND PROGRAMMATIC AGENDA FOR OUR COMMUNITY THAT
CONTINUES DEEP INTO THE 21ST CENTURY.
WE HOPE THAT OUR WORK HERE AT LEHRHAUS IS IN SOME SMALL MEASURE A
PERPETUATION OF HIS LEGACY. YEHI ZIKHRO BARUKH.

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 Lampert 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 עולות לבדק הבית' – מהו?"

The question is a technical one in הלכות קדשים. In the words of the *משה פני* 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 קרבן עולה that is inherited with מזבח קדשי can be also be sanctified with בדק הבית. But why is this question being asked קומי ערסיה דר' שמואל בן יוצדק, in front of the bier, at the funeral of יוצדק 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 מקדישי their status of עולה to the 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-halikhoh](#)” 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' שמואל צבי, תהא נשמתו צרורה בצרור החיים.

THE ENDING OF ALL ENDINGS: IN MEMORY OF MY ZEIDA, RABBI DR. NORMAN LAMM, ZZ”L

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Editor’s Note: This eulogy was delivered at an online memorial service for Dr. Lamm on Monday, June 1, 2020.

Last night, after spending four hours writing only to conclude that what I wrote was wholly insufficient, certainly not eloquent, and was a document that my grandfather would mark up with hundreds of track changes, I burst into tears and exclaimed to my husband Tzvi, whom I co-opted as my editor in lieu of Zeida, “Too bad I can’t give this to Zeida to edit.”

And maybe that’s precisely the point. I can’t give this to Zeida to edit, nor would it be possible to edit a description of a life, and to arrive at a masterpiece final draft. Because while editing is about the use of language and grammar, it’s fundamentally about perspective-taking. It’s about looking at someone’s ideas, and sharing fresh ideas on what they say and how they say it. And I am limited in perspective, though also extremely blessed; because while most of the world saw

my grandfather as the esteemed and revered Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, I have always seen him as Zeida. And therefore, I will never be able to write a final draft of this eulogy, because I will need you to help me edit and revise and rethink it over time by sharing what you see from where you stand.

Shortly before my Bat mitzvah, I was invited to 101 Central Park West and summoned to the living room. The Living Room (capital L, capital R) was rarely used, with the exception of special occasions, such as Lamm Family Chanukah parties. That was the only time that Zeida’s heavy wood shtender was moved from its place, due to the overflow of presents, people, and love. I took my position at the shtender which had been pushed next to the piano, and Grandma and Zeida stood a few feet away at the entrance to the room. My instructions were to practice my Bat Mitzvah speech (which, I’m not going to lie, was written by Zeida, but with words that I actually did understand). I was told to ENUNCIATE every word and talk LOUDLY. I was not excited, to put it mildly, and think I almost ran away, and certainly refused to practice more than once. But I could tell that public speaking skills, of which I had none, were very important. I knew it wasn’t a performance. It wasn’t about accruing fans. It was about using the God-given power of speech, a gift that He gave to humans only, as Zeida often taught on *Parshat Bereishit*, in order to share Torah and wisdom, inspire, and change people’s lives and the world with ideas. Like most of the things that I truly internalized from Zeida, I had never been told this explicitly; he taught us, his doting family flock, by doing and not by cajoling or sermonizing or lecturing.

To the world, he was Rabbi Lamm, the Rosh Yeshiva and President, a world-class scholar and teacher; to us, he was Zeida, the loving head of Tinokot shel beit Lamm. There was no pressure, no didactics, just a Zeida who was available to share his passion for learning - if we wished. He made learning exciting through pop-up events such as family learning, co-sponsored by Barton’s Candy at the Homowack on Pesach, and would learn whatever we wanted, whenever we wanted.

In high school I fell in love with Gemara learning, and in college, with philosophy. As a young adult on a quest for meaning, I found that Shas coupled with philosophy was an endless world of wisdom rife for analysis and synthesis. The jelly beans in the glass jar that resided permanently in the living room were delicious, as were the Entenmann’s chocolate chip cookies dipped in milk that my grandmother stocked; but Brisker Lomdus, Plato, and Aristotle were equally tasty, if not better. And I discovered that while there was a large stock of these delicacies, there was a simply **unending** supply of Torah, wisdom, passion and love, perfectly packaged in the form of Zeida.

He never questioned my motivation to learn, even though for someone of his generation it was a novel concept. He just made me feel like a complete insider to the Mesorah, *Tradition* club, of which I knew he was a knowledgeable member, but never internalized that he was actually a club President and Editor-in-Chief. He would bring home pages and pages of print-outs of YU Seforim Sale items so he could pre-order seforim for us. He purchased my first mini-Shas for me in Meah Shearim when I was in Migdal Oz in 1999 while I waited outside the store, after our attempt at store #1 was a fail, when the owner realized that the Shas was not for him, but for me. He started the Graduate Program for Advanced Talmudic Studies, GPATS, which afforded me the opportunity to sit in the Stern College Beit Midrash after I graduated college. Without my knowing or even realizing that he might have something to do with GPATS, since in my eyes he was my grandfather, not Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, his imprimatur of this program was instrumental in leading me toward teaching Gemara

and ultimately toward becoming a Yoetzet Halacha. Only years later did I learn that he had supported, and was famously photographed in, the Rav's first Gemara shiur at Stern College. And only now am I beginning to understand how the inestimable value he placed on the observance of Taharat ha-Mishpaha, and his early support of Nishmat, have enabled me to help support other's commitment to this pivotal area of Torah living.

As my affinity for learning developed, Zeida used to introduce me as his "all the time eldest granddaughter and sometimes-chavrusa." I would call him to help me understand the *peshat* of a Gemara as if it were a royal emergency, and he would extend his royal reach within the hour and explain it as many times as I needed. When I was having challenges finding the perfect chavruta, which I catastrophized to be the absolute end of my spiritual existence and identity—and he of course took me very seriously anyways—I asked him if he would be my *havrutah* every day for three hours. I believe that was the only time he ever turned down a request to learn, but there was a counter-offer: three days a week. After Tzvi and I got married, our learning continued to include him as well. Zeida's esteemed assistant Gladys would welcome us to his office on the 5th floor of Furst Hall, after arranging that we arrive at the predetermined time that would enable us to park in Zeida's parking spot.

Throughout high school, college, and GPATs, I either spoke to or emailed Zeida almost daily. Once I called him in the midst of an emergency-level dating crisis, and he had his driver bring him from uptown to Starbucks on 40th and Lex near Stern within 90 minutes to talk. Other times it was the email or phone call, "Paper is due tomorrow, I know it's 10PM, can you please edit..." In retrospect, I cannot fathom how he ever had time for this; I am only one of the seventeen grandchildren who were each clamoring for his undivided attention - which we each received.

The years when I can ask Zeida my existential questions about life and learning have passed. I cannot pick his brain for endings, or for the perfect title with an alliteration that is both intelligent and witty. My children will not have the opportunity to send Zeida a paper that is due in less than twelve hours, needs to be a masterpiece, and requires at least fifty track changes, or in the olden days, rounds of multiple, barely legible, handwritten edits.

The last email correspondence of this nature that I can find is from February 15, 2009, regarding the first article I ever submitted to an education journal. The email thread is entitled "completely edited masterpiece," I would imagine titled by him as my editor-in-chief. In the eleventh hour I wrote, "Still stuck on the ending. If you have any thoughts... I have spent over 20 hours on this paper. *Dayenu*." To which he replied in purple caps, in his witty style, "PATIENCE. I JUST SENT AN ENDING TO YOU. IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, IT WILL BE THE END OF ALL ENDINGS..."

I did like, and usually loved, the endings that Zeide penned. This ending, that Zeida has left us, IS actually the ending of all endings. And Zeida, I have to tell you, I don't like your ending.

But as you taught us, we don't get to write the story, we only get to choose how to live it, and we don't get to write the ending either. So I will, as you wrote, try hard to follow your instructions of "patience," and accept your ending. I will try to embrace this ending in the way that **you** would have wanted, as painful as that is: by reading it, accepting it, learning from it, and by, together with all who have been impacted by you, attempting the daunting task of writing the next chapter of the Jewish people.

RABBI NORMAN LAMM'S THEOLOGY OF ANTI-RACISM

SHMUEL LAMM works as a software engineer in New York and, outside of that, researches the sermons and other writings of Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm.

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm significantly impacted world Jewry through his scholarship, oratory, and organization of communal institutions. Part of his influence stemmed from the thousands of sermons and addresses he delivered over the course of his career, particularly as Rabbi of the Jewish Center in Manhattan and later as President of Yeshiva University. These contributions to the American Jewish homiletic tradition, however, have remained underexplored.

For Rabbi Lamm, *derashot* were qualitatively different from a discourse on Jewish law or a Talmudic lecture. At the same time, they were more than "Torah lite." In his "[Notes of An Unrepentant Darshan](#)" he described the *derashah* as a critical tool for Jewish leaders which, done well, inspires Jewish values, elucidates *halakha* and, through the lens of Torah, speaks to moral issues on the minds of the audience. As Rabbi Lamm argued, "If *Halakha* is the science of Jewish religious life, *derush* is its art, and esthetics needs no apology in its claim to a rightful place in the sanctuary of Torah." It behooves us, then, to pay serious attention to Rabbi Lamm's *derashot*, a genre that, nearly more than any other medium, offered him a chance to speak most closely to the values of his audience.

One of the most explosive and persistent issues throughout Rabbi Lamm's years in the pulpit—first at Kehilath Jeshurun in Manhattan from 1951-1953, then Kodimoh in Springfield, Massachusetts from 1954-1958 and, finally, from 1958-1976 at the Jewish Center in Manhattan—was racism and the Civil Rights Movement. Starting in 1951, Rabbi Lamm delivered numerous sermons that touched on both these themes. He preached on topics as broad as Jim Crow laws and South African apartheid and as specific as the Groveland Four in Florida and the Civil Rights March in Washington, D.C.

In these sermons, Rabbi Lamm decried the brutality of racial discrimination and called for its end. But beyond engaging the plight of the victims, Rabbi Lamm focused on the perpetrators: racists themselves. Though Rabbi Lamm's sermons were delivered over the span of many years and focus on different aspects of the racist's persona, woven together they yield a fleshed-out conception of racism.

An Untitled Sermon from 1954

To appreciate Rabbi Lamm's views on the evils of racism, we must first explore how he viewed the responsibilities of those with freedom and power in society. One of Rabbi Lamm's earliest sermons on this theme stemmed not from concerns over racism, but antisemitism. In 1954, while Rabbi Lamm served as the Rabbi of Springfield's Congregation Kodimoh, a local newspaper advertised houses marketed to exclude applications from Jews. Soon after, in response, Rabbi Lamm delivered an impassioned sermon in which he focused on American antisemitism's ability to engender a religious inferiority complex among Jews, prompting them to use their social freedom to abandon Judaism in favor of doctrines more culturally compatible with their neighbors.

In the face of this acculturation concern, Rabbi Lamm examined the responsibilities of Jews living in a free society. To do this, he analyzed the Jubilee year, with its [proclamation](#) of freedom for the bondsman in the following verse: "And you shall proclaim liberty throughout the

land for all its inhabitants” (Leviticus 25:10). Relying on an interpretation proffered by Rashi, the medieval Biblical commentator, Rabbi Lamm interpreted the freedom granted by this proclamation as a freedom of movement. The freed bondsman can live wherever he likes and in association with whomever he likes. But, as Rabbi Lamm proceeds to note, the second half of the verse is just as important: “you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.” As he interprets, the Torah instructs the bondman that, with his newfound freedom, he must choose to return to and associate with those of his ancestral faith.

Like the freed bondsman, Rabbi Lamm announced, “every thinking man and woman” in a free society chooses to live by a set of beliefs. But as the Torah’s proclamation indicates, these beliefs must be judged by the degree to which they reflect either the worship of God, or of a foreign ideal. In the modern age, these foreign ideals have taken a variety of new forms. As Rabbi Lamm described:

Some of our people have bowed before the god of Communism, only to learn that now its true colors show when it puts forth its ‘restricted’ sign ... Some have put their faith and sought redemption in the naive nineteenth century belief in Progress and Science, only to see it ... bellowing forth mushroom-shaped clouds ... Some have tried Ethical Culture, others have tried assimilation. They are wanderers, aimlessly hopping from station to station on the great road which leads nowhere. Come back, says God, each to his heritage, to Torah, and each to his family, to Israel.

In Rabbi Lamm’s view, every ideological system, regardless of its religious professions, must be evaluated according to whether or how it encompasses Godly values. It is this standard that Rabbi Lamm would consistently employ—including, as we shall see, in the context of racism—to measure the conduct of the powerful.

“The Religious Foundation of Business” (1963)

The 1960s and 1970s marked the black American community’s most vigorous protest efforts against discrimination. It was the era of mass sit-ins across the southern states, widespread voter registration movements, and the Birmingham Campaign in Alabama. Civil Rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. were at the height of their activity and violent and nonviolent protests garnered rapt national attention.

Rabbi Lamm delivered his 1963 sermon, “The Religious Foundation of Business,” a few days after the landmark March on Washington during which, in front of 250,000 fellow protestors, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. This momentous civil rights event provided a backdrop for Rabbi Lamm’s address on dishonesty and discrimination in business.

In this sermon, Rabbi Lamm considered with his congregants the mystifying statement in the Talmud (Bava Batra 88b) that ‘the [heavenly] punishment for false measures is more severe than for sexual immorality.’ The man with his fingers on the scale, in other words, is worse than the adulterer. Rabbi Lamm seized on the obvious challenge: How can financial deceit eclipse adultery, one of the most severe sins in Jewish religious tradition?

Rabbi Lamm’s response weaved in thoughts from the nineteenth century commentator Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (Neziv). Relying on Neziv, Rabbi Lamm observed that the adulterer’s sin is a crime of passion. He is overcome by a flash of desire. By contrast, the creation

and use of false measures requires a colder, more calculated decision. It indicates less a one-time act and more an effort to perpetuate methodical corruption. The mindset behind prototypical false measures, then, is more extensive than a crime of passion. Whereas the sin of adultery is momentary, the sin of false measures is systematic.

In that vein, argued Rabbi Lamm, the sin of false measures, in its premeditated and comprehensive rejection of Godly principles, is a subset of the most severe iniquity of all: idolatry. Just as idolatry represents a repeated, far-reaching rejection of godliness, so too does the use of false measures. Thus, just as idolatry—as a systematic crime—is more spiritually severe than adultery, so too, according to the Talmud, is the sin of using false measures.

If employing just false measures is akin to idol worship, Rabbi Lamm asked, what does an entire system of economic discrimination say about the perpetrators? As Rabbi Lamm turned to Civil Rights and the March on Washington, he announced to his congregants:

The crux of the issue is not so much “freedom now” for the Negroes as self-respect and dignity now for the white majority which allowed such disgraceful discrimination to continue unabated for a hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation. It was bad enough when hate frenzied mobs lynched individual Negroes, but this crime of *shefikhat damim* (homicide) is exceeded by the greater blot on our record: the methodical economic exploitation of one segment of our population, the systematic oppression of one race as the source of cheap labor and its designation as the first to suffer in any economic recession.

Widespread, systematic racism, for Rabbi Lamm, embodied a monstrous sin of false measures. By extension, then, racism bore the spiritual mark of idolatry. Thus, Rabbi Lamm argued, there were two casualties in economic discrimination, not just one. Clearly the first were the black victims, who suffered dire economic consequences. But the weight of responsibility, the “crux of the issue,” fell upon white Americans. They, as the powerful and liberated majority of the 1960s, were the ones obligated to act with the responsibility of the “freed bondsman,” bound still to create a Godly society. Those who tolerate the idolatry of racism, then, lose their spiritual self-respect and dignity. They have subverted the divine sanctity of other humans and, as Rabbi Lamm continued, violated the spirit of American democracy. They have not returned to their “*ahuzah*” (heritage). They have become ethically and spiritually maimed.

“Insights Into Evil” (1964)

Yet if racism is so evil, how does the racist mindset form? Especially in an enlightened, religion-influenced Western society, it seems that if people were free to decide their own conduct and racism were an evil on par with idolatry, then no one would practice it. If each free person may choose between service to God and a host of other idolatrous creeds, then understanding society’s descent into racism, a modern form of idolatry, is critical.

Rabbi Lamm tackled this question after an advisory visit to the Jewish community in Johannesburg, South Africa, at a time when the horrors of apartheid were just beginning to attract international protest. Though, as his letters show, he established warm ties with the Jewish community there, he returned sickened by South African racism. Indeed, a short time later, in 1964, he delivered a stinging sermon, “Insights Into Evil,” in which he explored how an otherwise civilized society could support such awful discrimination. To do this, he drew

upon the episode of the golden calf, the Jew's paradigmatic, shocking sin at the pinnacle of their spiritual experience (Exodus 32).

In addressing this sin, Rabbi Lamm focused on the perplexing behavior of Aaron the High Priest. After the Jews conceived the plan to build an idol, they approached Aaron and he, surprisingly, actually constructed the golden calf. As the Torah then [relates](#), however, "and Aaron saw and he built an altar before Him, and Aaron called out and he said there will be a festival to the Lord tomorrow" (Exodus 32:5). Relying on the medieval Biblical commentator Ramban, Rabbi Lamm interpreted Aaron as building an altar not to the idol, but to God. He was offering the Jews a way out. He declared a festival intending it as a call to rightful worship and repentance.

Yet the phrase before Aaron's change of heart, "and Aaron saw," remains ambiguous, as the Torah never specifies what it was exactly that he saw. The sages, according to Rashi, understood Aaron to have perceived that the once-inert calf had become alive. It moved and ate as would a real, living thing. As Rabbi Lamm homiletically reasoned, this procession—from Aaron's initial contact with the idol, to seeing it come alive, to declaring for God—represented three stages in man's confrontation with falsehood.

At first, a false doctrine might seem ridiculous and obviously incorrect. Aaron was incredulous that the Jews could possibly think that a metal idol could replace the God who redeemed them from Egypt. He humored them and built the calf, assuming they would snap out of their hysterics and come to their senses.

Then, however, came the second stage. Aaron saw that the idol was moving. The falsehood began to take on independent life. It became appealing. In Rabbi Lamm's words:

As you become accustomed to it [the falsehood], as you study it, you learn that it may work—and indeed it does work! You can live with it—and get away with it. Furthermore, it is not as absurd as you originally thought. There are compelling reasons for the existence of idolatry or any false doctrine—sociological, psychological, and historical reasons ... There are reasons for idolatry which you must appreciate and understand.

This falsehood then becomes entrenched, society becomes corrupted. As Rabbi Lamm continued:

If you stop at this stage of your development, then insight turns to tolerance, tolerance to sympathy, and sympathy to consent and acceptance. If you stop at this stage, then you bow the knee to a statue, you swallow the lie, you swear by falsehood. Then open-mindedness becomes closed-heartedness.

To Rabbi Lamm, this gradual slide into falsehood typified many modern forms of idolatry, whether Soviet communism, scientism, or single-minded materialism. It applied, as well, to racism, "one of the most pernicious and idolatrous doctrines in the memory of living man."

Indeed, in a fascinating demonstration, Rabbi Lamm proceeded in his sermon to enumerate arguments by South Africans in favor of apartheid—each with its own appeal to truth, whether in statistics or cultural observations—illustrating how horrific ideals can be masked by rational, scientific arguments. None of these arguments, he

thundered, could erase racism's flagrant moral perversity. Racists were stuck in the second stage of rationalized evil.

Amid this evil, the third and final stage in Aaron's encounter with the idol becomes critical. "And Aaron saw and he built an altar before Him [God]"—Aaron saw the appeal the idol held and, in that moment of revelation, when he appreciated all its advantages, he forced himself as well to see its perversity. As Rabbi Lamm declared, "with all the study and awareness and broadmindedness, you recognize the perniciousness, all the ugliness and danger of *avodah zarah* [idolatrous worship], and you condemn idolatry as evil throughout." It is at this point that Aaron built the altar and declared a festival for the true God of Israel.

Aaron's gut repulsion, instinctive in the first stage, was tested in the second stage. Yet instead of declaring for the idol, he had the moral fortitude, in the third stage, to declare for God. So too, Rabbi Lamm insisted, racists and racist societies must make the same turn toward God or continue suffering the spiritual turpitude of idolatry.

"Putting a Bad Conscience to Good Use" (1966)

Since racism, as idolatry, can ferment in rationalized, creeping stages, it can take on different forms. Racism is not restricted to firebrands like the Jim Crow supporters of the Old South. Indeed, as Rabbi Lamm believed, it was a subtle form of racism, the type coated with a veneer of reason and built upon legitimate cultural angst, that most often permeated his Jewish community. And so Rabbi Lamm turned his sights inward.

In his 1966 sermon "Putting a Bad Conscience To Good Use," Rabbi Lamm illustrated a mechanism for this subtle racism through a comparison between Adam after he eats from the Tree of Knowledge (Genesis 3) and Abraham before he is ordered to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22). The relationship between these two scenes is made explicit by Rabbi Avraham ben ha-Rambam, who contrasted Abraham's [response](#) to God calling for him—"Here I am"—with Adam's [excuse](#) for hiding—"I saw that I was naked so I hid."

Both these responses, according to Rabbi Lamm, follow transgressions. Adam had sinned by eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Abraham, according to the midrashic tradition, had just thrown a celebratory feast in which he had invited all the nearby leaders and kings but, in a rare moment of callousness, failed to include any of the weak or less fortunate. When God then approaches Abraham, another *midrash* interprets that it was after Abraham had undergone a "deep meditation and self-analysis." This meditation, Rabbi Lamm suggested, was Abraham's introspection in the wake of his errors at the feast.

Yet if both Adam and Abraham sinned, they respond to God in morally opposite ways. These two ways, Rabbi Lamm argued, consisted of two different reactions to a guilty conscience. In Adam's case, he heard God approaching and, realizing his disgraceful state, sought to run and hide. Even when confronted, he attempted to shift the blame to his wife. Abraham on the other hand, when called to attention by God, responded with an affirmation of his continued commitment to Him. He indicated his willingness, in the face of his post-sin introspection, to be tested in his faith toward God with the commandment to sacrifice his son. In the first case, Adam ran from his bad conscience. In the second, Abraham confronted it.

In applying this dichotomy to contemporary events, Rabbi Lamm addressed racism specifically in the Jewish community. As he argued in this 1966 sermon, most Jews, as relatively powerful and integrated

members of American society, should suffer “some degree” of troubled conscience over the horrible white discrimination against blacks, even if most Jews are not themselves responsible for it.

But this was not enough. For in the face of this bad conscience, he feared, lay the danger of Adam’s blame-shifting, of using legitimately distasteful behavior in the black community, such as riots, the (eventual) Black Panthers, or antisemitism, as an excuse for feelings of white racial superiority. We Jews, he warned, cannot shift the blame for racism:

[T]o Black Power bigots, to the hoodlums who riot in Watts, to Negro anti-Semitism. We conveniently ignore the fact that in whole sections of our country there are whites who hold power yet we have tolerated it; that hoodlums come in all colors; and that while Negro anti-Semitism is terribly troubling, we have some degree of experience with white anti-Semitism—six million killed in our time alone!

Rabbi Lamm validated resentment against black rioters and, indeed, composed multiple sermons outlining a broader ethics of protest that he believed they, as well as other rioters, routinely violated. Yet, as he argued in a later sermon, “Law and Order,” in the wake of the ‘66-‘67 race riots, even justified resentment against some members of the black community cannot be used as a “pious disguise” for “xenophobia, fear, racial antagonisms, and innate bigotry.” Rather, like Abraham, Jews should strive to put a bad conscience to good use and, judiciously, strive for racial equality.

Conclusion

For Rabbi Lamm, racism is only possible because a free and responsible person can, like the manumitted bondsman, express Godly or idolatrous beliefs through his actions. In the case of racism, the specific belief expressed—like false measures—is an idolatrous one in its rejection of Godly values through the systematic victimization of others. Despite racism’s seemingly obvious evil, it can run rampant through a society because false ideologies, like the golden calf, can be easily and comfortably rationalized. Though a belief or course of action may feel instinctively evil, people are remarkably good at justifying it. And even when people are forced to confront their own racist tendencies, it is tempting, like Adam confronted by God, to evade culpability, build straw-men, and shift the blame to others, including the victims.

But there is the flip side to this gloomy picture. Like the bondsman, a person can choose to express Godly values by cleaving to one’s ethical-religious heritage. Like Aaron, a person can reject idolatry even as it threatens to overcome and use the experience to further sanctify God. Like Abraham, one can courageously concede and confront a guilty conscience, using it as a stimulus to improve.

It is not my place to venture how Rabbi Lamm would apply his views to our own day and age. That said, dimensions of racial, ethnic, and religious tension remain a central part of both the national conversation and the internal Jewish communal discourse. Rabbi Lamm certainly believed that his sermons, in imparting religious values, transcended any particular case of discrimination. Indeed, in the sermons themselves he applies each of the above lines of reasoning to a diverse array of events, ills, and ideologies relevant to his congregants. We would do well, therefore, like Abraham after his feast, to draw upon Rabbi Lamm’s sermons in performing our own introspection and self-analysis.

Difficult but, we pray, enriching conversations await.

DR. NORMAN LAMM’S TRAILBLAZING TALMUDIC METHODOLOGY

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When Two trends are particularly prominent in contemporary Modern Orthodox Torah study. First, the last two decades have seen a rise in the popularity of non-halakhic spiritual texts, particularly *hasidut*. The popularity of [Netivot Shalom](#), [Sfat Emet](#), [the Piazescner](#), and [Rav Shagar](#), to name just a few, bears more than adequate testimony to this striking development.

Second, particularly in Israel, there is an increasing tendency to integrate traditional Talmud study and a wide range of alternative methodological tools. Sometimes termed “Neo-Lomdus,” these approaches mix Brisker Lomdus, historical tools, literary methods, *hasidut* and *kabbalah*, and even art and music, and have gained popularity among a cluster of *yeshivot hesder*. Rav Shagar, whose thought has been the subject of lively discussion on these pages in recent weeks, was at the forefront of these developments, stressing the importance of deriving personal meaning from text study.

In a more moderate vein, Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein has [suggested](#) that Brisk’s emphasis on the defining essential halakhic principles can lead to a deeper appreciation of *halakhah*’s underlying values. In his terminology, the “what” can lead us to better understand the “why.”

Best known for his mastery of Jewish philosophy, *hasidut*, and homiletics, Dr. Lamm also distinguished himself as a first-rate *lamdan*. As a youngster, Dr. Lamm first studied with his maternal grandfather, Rabbi Yehoshua Baumel, author of the Responsa *Emek Halakhah*, and later under Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. While President of Yeshiva University, he taught and published Talmudic discourses each year.

In elucidating his viewpoint, we will examine a variety of Dr. Lamm’s articles and books, especially [The Shema](#), [Torah Umadda](#), and [Halakhot Va-Halikhhot](#), a collection of his Talmudic novella. A careful study will demonstrate that Dr. Lamm assigns significant weight to both *halakhah* and *aggadah*, and forcefully advocates the integration of classical Talmudic analysis with the study of Jewish thought. What is more, this advocacy of integration flows from Dr. Lamm’s embrace of monism, a mystical position prominent in *hasidut* and the thought of Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook. Taken as a whole, his ideas anticipated current trends in Talmud study by decades, and offer a bold philosophical foundation upon which to construct the synthesis of Jewish law and Jewish thought.

Weighing Halakhah and Jewish Thought

Alongside his attraction to *mahashavah*, Dr. Lamm regularly stresses the importance of halakhic study, insisting that they are to be viewed as equally important. While he points out that according to Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin “the highest value is assigned the study of *Halakhah*” (*Torah Umadda*, 162), Dr. Lamm refuses to privilege either Jewish law or Jewish thought in his own constellation of values.

In his introduction to *The Shema*, a work that explores the relationship between *halakhah* and spiritual experience, for instance,

Dr. Lamm insists that both *halakhah* and spirituality are essential. As he puts it in the introduction:

The contrast between the two—spirituality and law—is almost self-evident ... Yet both are necessary. Spirituality alone begets antinomianism and chaos; law alone is artificial and insensitive. Without the body of the law, spirituality is a ghost. Without the sweep of the soaring soul, the corpus of law tends to become a corpse ... In Judaism, each side - spirit and law - shows understanding of the other; we are not asked to choose one over the other, but to practice a proper balance that respects and reconciles the demands of each.” (*The Shema*, 6-7)

True, in response to social trends that he saw as troubling, Dr. Lamm variously lays greater emphasis on *halakhah* and spirituality. In response to the sexual revolution and the New Morality of the 1960s and 70s, for instance, Dr. Lamm emphasizes the importance of law as a bulwark against permissiveness. “Without law,” he writes, “we cannot distinguish between licit and illicit love.” Law also protects love from falling prey to its own excesses. Left unchecked, “love destroys all - including itself” (*Seventy Faces*, vol. I, 176-77). On the other hand, (*Seventy Faces*, vol. II, 94-107), Dr. Lamm also defends the sermon, which places great emphasis on Jewish thought and morality, bemoaning the devolution of the sermon into a *dvar halakhah*.

His larger point regarding sexual ethics and homiletics, however, is not to privilege law over spirituality or vice versa. He seeks, in the spirit of the Golden Mean, to restore a rightful balance that has been disrupted. Refusing to assign greater weight to the realm of *halakhah* or Jewish thought, he contends that both are indispensable.

An Advocate for Integration

So much for the theoretical balance between the study of Talmud and Jewish thought. But what should be the proper interaction between these disciplines? May there be any “slippage,” for instance, between *Gemara* and *hasidut*?

In *Torah Lishmah*, Dr. Lamm elaborates what he terms Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner’s “Dissociation Principle” (277). According to this rule, which Rabbi Hayyim formulated in relation to the study of *Gemara* and *mussar*, Talmud study must be pursued independently of any other discipline. This view is an outgrowth of Rabbi Hayyim’s general position that Torah must be studied for its own sake and not for an ulterior motive, and that to cling to Torah is *ipso facto* to cling to the divine (279). Importantly, though, Dr. Lamm does not present R. Hayyim’s view as his own.

Instead, in *Torah Umadda*, Dr. Lamm begins to present his own view on the prospects of synthesis. After tentatively proposing a middle ground between outright separation and complete synthesis, Dr. Lamm “admits, with appropriate professions of shame and inadequacy, that he has not (yet) come to a firm conclusion on the matter” (190). He goes on to explain that the hasidic approach to *Torah u-Madda*, to which we will soon turn, allows him to sidestep the question. He prefers to leave the question open, declaring that “every individual is free to follow his or her own judgment, talent, and inclination in choosing either genuine synthesis or coexistence” (190-1).

Elsewhere in *Torah Umadda*, Dr. Lamm is less equivocal. After citing Rambam’s attempt to develop an overarching framework

encompassing Jewish thought and Jewish law, Dr. Lamm refers to the potential value of such a project:

As long as halakhic Jews persist in isolating *Halakhah* from integration into *Hashkafah* (a larger theoretical framework or *Anschauung*), it runs the risk of becoming a form of religious behaviorism in inadequate relevance to the perennial problems of the human spirit. (85)

Dr. Lamm’s aforementioned *Halakhot Va-Halikhhot*, a compilation of twenty-seven Talmud essays that Dr. Lamm previously published in Torah journals, forcefully presses and models this synthesizing methodology. As he observes at the outset of his introduction, roughly half the chapters in the book attempt to bridge *halakhah* and *aggadah*; the latter, he hastens to add, includes not just Talmudic and midrashic sources but also the Jewish mystical, hasidic, and philosophical traditions.

In a crucial passage, he explains that the goal of linking these areas is to

reveal the spiritual and conceptual closeness between these two worlds, and to demonstrate that the giants of Jewish law who engaged in agadic thinking (as previously defined) did not possess bipolar souls, God forbid. Instead, there are basic notions that found expression in different ways, namely both regarding Jewish law and areas beyond Jewish law. This is what motivated me to entitle this book *Halakhot Va-Halikhhot*. (*Halakhot Va-Halikhhot*, pg. 12)

Herein, Dr. Lamm not only advocates for integration over coexistence, but also offers a theological framework for his position: *halakhah and Jewish thought are essentially one and the same*. They are merely different expressions of a single fundamental truth.

On the basis of this approach, Dr. Lamm explains a Talmudic teaching: “The school of Elyahu taught: Anyone who studies *halakhot* every day is guaranteed to be destined for the World to Come, as it is stated: ‘His ways [*halikhhot*] are eternal’: Do not read ways [*halikhhot*]; rather, laws [*halakhot*]” (*Niddah* 73a). The intention of the Gemara is that *halakhot* contain kernels of *halikhhot*, namely wider motifs. One who integrates them merits a share in the World to Come (11-12).

Dr. Lamm cites precedents for this project. Rabbi Meir Simchah and Rabbi Yosef Rosen of Dvinsk, one a *mitnaged* and the other a *hasid*, sought to harmonize Rambam’s legal rulings with his philosophy as presented in the *Guide to the Perplexed*. Rabbi Shalom Schwadron and Rabbi Yosef Engel sought to reconcile *halakhah* with *kabbalah*.

For instance, in his *Otzrot Yosef (Ma’amar Levanah, Ma’amar David)*, Rabbi Engel seeks to account for the kabbalistic view that the moon is associated with the *sefirah* of *malkhut*, royalty. Rabbi Engel cites extensive sources from the Gemara in support of this kabbalistic contention. Furthermore, he marshals his halakhic position that the Sanhedrin sometimes functions not as an independent entity but as a proxy for the entire nation. Just as the Jewish people are associated with the *sefirah* of royalty, so too is the moon, which is sanctified by the Sanhedrin, the people’s representative. Remarkably, Rabbi Rosen possessed some twenty additional manuscripts in which he located the roots of the kabbalistic tradition in the *Bavli* and *Yerushalmi*; apparently, Dr. Lamm rues, these were ravaged by the Holocaust’s inferno (14-15).

Similarly, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Bloch insists that “the difference between law and lore is only in their manners of learning and deduction; but regarding their content and form, they form a single, complete Torah. It is impossible to arrive at a complete understanding of one without the complement of the other.” Moreover, Dr. Lamm’s teacher, Rabbi Soloveitchik, often integrated the two domains in his public lectures, and “one is obligated to speak in the language of his teacher” (16). All these titans viewed *halakhah* and *aggadah* through a unified lens.

In Dr. Lamm’s sweeping portrait, *hasidim*, *mitnagdim*, Briskers, and mussarists stand side-by-side in support of integration; the *Bavli* and *Yerushalmi* offer a foundation for mystical ideas. What is more, Dr. Lamm argues not just for practical synthesis but for the fundamental unity of *halakhah* and Jewish thought. As he puts it, “to what may the matter be compared? To a blind person who feels numerous branches, but does not know that they are all unified as part of a single tree, for there is a single root to them all” (12).

Monism for Moderns

Dr. Lamm’s sympathy for the kabbalistic and hasidic doctrine of monism, which drives him to unify the various domains of Torah, is a central motif in his theology.

In “[The Unity Theme and its Implications for Moderns](#),” Dr. Lamm advocates for the contemporary necessity of such a worldview. In the modern world, “the Whole Man has faded into obscurity... Man’s spiritual and religious life has become a true World of Disunity. Long before the atom bomb struck Hiroshima, the modern world sustained a historic atomization, the fission and dis-integration of man’s heart and soul and mind, and the beginning of the end of his *universe*” (55).

Instead, the Zohar, hasidic thinkers, Rav Kook and even, to a degree, Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, promote a fundamentally monistic view of this world. Our entire universe, according to this theological view, is a part of the divine. God is not the equivalent of the world (pantheism) but He encompasses and transcends the world (panentheism).

Moreover, Rav Kook holds that there is a need for *yihud*, unity, in the “transcending of epistemological limitations” (56). All knowledge, unless one attaches oneself to God, the sole source of all knowledge, remains partial. Thus, for Rav Kook, all entities, whether material or conceptual, including the various components of Torah, are truly one. Prophecy and *halakhah* must be understood in relation with one another, for ultimately, they are one and the same. Much the same may be said, according to Rav Kook, for the distinction that has been artificially and harmfully drawn between *halakhah* and *aggadah*.

Dr. Lamm’s colleague and fellow philosopher Rabbi Walter Wurzbarger [vigorously opposed](#) the presentation of *halakhah* as a monistic rather than pluralistic system (pluralistic in the sense of permitting multiple voices and truths that must be balanced). Nonetheless, in an updated version of his own article, published as “The Unity Theme: Monism for Moderns” in [Faith and Doubt](#) (pps. 42-68), Dr. Lamm refused to cede any ground.

Further, in *Torah Umadda*, Dr. Lamm offers six models for the relationship between Torah and general wisdom. Two of the six, “The Mystical Model” and “The Hasidic Model,” detailed in chapters six and ten respectively, are rooted in a monistic outlook. Indeed, the two models are so similar that Dr. Lamm dedicates chapter eleven of his *Torah Umadda* to justifying his decision to treat them as two distinct views. The hasidic model is rooted in the doctrine of “divine immanence” (151). For the hasidic masters, God’s presence

permeates all of material existence. The doctrine of *avodah be-gashmiyut*, worship through corporeality, is one of the primary corollaries of this precept. Nothing in our world lacks divinity and the potential for sanctification. Similarly, for Rav Kook, the universe is comprised not of sacred and profane, but of holy and not-yet-holy. Through the encounter of Torah and wisdom, a higher truth emerges.

Indeed, *Torah Umadda*’s organizational structure, which concludes with the hasidic model and compares its implications with those of all previous models (chapter twelve), implies that Dr. Lamm favors this approach. In a published [interview](#), Dr. Lamm makes the point explicit, stating in reference to the hasidic stance, “The last one is really the one that’s my darling.”

Dr. Lamm’s attraction to monism, both on theoretical grounds and as a salve for modern wounds, offers a powerful account of his embrace of synthesis in *Halakhot Va-Halikhhot*. If existence is monistic, all parts of Torah are similarly united. This provides a powerful theoretical foundation for an integrated learning methodology. It also helps to explain his refusal to assign theoretical preference to *halakhah* in comparison with other domains of Jewish thought: in the end, there really is no point in privileging one domain of Torah over others, for they are ultimately one and the same. Although a particular methodology is appropriate for each realm of Torah study, there is a single root to them all.

Dr. Lamm’s embrace of monism offers an important starting point for a holistic model of *talmud Torah*. As practiced in his public *shiurim* and exemplified in his printed essays, Dr. Lamm put forward a theory of *lomdus* as “monism for moderns” decades before such an approach became popular in Israeli circles. In presciently anticipating key aspects of these developments, Dr. Lamm offers a model for an integrated model of *lomdus* to which today’s interested Talmud student may readily turn for inspiration.

Postscript

From 2004-2007, my wife Tova (Dr. Lamm’s granddaughter) and I enjoyed the exquisite opportunity to learn with Dr. Lamm once each week throughout the academic year. I vividly recall riding the elevator each Tuesday at 12pm up to the fifth floor of Yeshiva University’s Furst Hall, where Dr. Lamm’s suite was located. We stepped into his office, so inundated with *sefarim* that they spilled over into a fully-stocked closet next door.

Each year we chose another subject. We studied *Pirkei Avot* with a range of commentaries, R. Hayyim of Volozhin’s *Nefesh Ha-Hayyim*, the subject of Dr. Lamm’s dissertation written under Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, and selected sections from R. Meir Simha of Dvinsk’s *Meshekh Hokhma*. Beyond the fond memories, two impressions are still etched in my mind. Taken together, they offer a personal perspective that enriches our analysis of Dr. Lamm’s approach to *lomdus*.

First, Dr. Lamm’s wide-ranging erudition was on full display. In relation to our study of *Avot*, for example, I recall him recommending multiple commentaries with which I was utterly unfamiliar. He recommended a commentary written by a hasidic rebbe who sympathized greatly with the Religious Zionist movement - an unusual combination, to say the least. In addition to his familiarity with eclectic *sefarim*, he also demonstrated a mastery of a remarkable range of interpretive approaches. I still recall his suggestion, to take just one example, that the Mishnah (*Avot* 5:19) contrasting Avraham and Bilam can best be understood as a subtle

polemic comparing Christianity unfavorably with Judaism. Throughout, his capacity to marshal philosophical, psychological and historical tools in the study of *Avot*, too often reduced to *vertlach* and not sophisticated analysis, thrilled and inspired.

Second, Dr. Lamm's unending love of learning was palpable. He would joyously share his favorite explanations. Even more striking was the look of unadulterated joy when we encountered a text or idea that he found enlightening. At ages 77-80, following an enervating career as a pulpit rabbi and university president, he still exhibited almost childlike energy. He was forever assimilating fresh material and updating decades-old ideas.

The weekly *chavruta*, in other words, demonstrated how a lifelong commitment to interdisciplinary learning can empower even the busiest of community leaders to continue developing as a Torah scholar. I saw first-hand how Dr. Lamm's passion and erudition enabled him not only to envision but also to implement his vision of an integrated model of *talmud Torah*. For that inspiration, I am eternally grateful.

RABBI NORMAN LAMM AND HIS CRUSADE FOR THE JEWISH HOME

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Sometime in the 1960s, Rabbi Norman Lamm delivered a lecture to The Jewish Center's Young Marrieds Club. By his own account, his Upper West Side audience of twenty-somethings offered a "cordial and approving reception," convincing Rabbi Lamm that he ought to publish his remarks on the merits of marriage and family purity.

In short order, Rabbi Lamm's best-selling [Hedge of Roses](#) emerged as the go-to text for Orthodox marriage counselors, rabbis and young people. The book championed the "purity of the Jewish family" and its responsibility for the "perpetuation of the House of Israel." Its author looked to the Orthodox Jewish home as a sanctuary from an "environment where the breakdown of family life becomes more shocking with each year." For Rabbi Lamm, then, the home was more sacred, perhaps, than the synagogue.

His notions apparently [resonated](#). Feldheim Publishers printed six editions of the short tract. The family purity manifesto was also translated into French, Hebrew, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish.

Rabbi Lamm's focus on the Jewish family endeared him to a generation of Orthodox young people that sought out a theologian and pastor to make sense of their changing American climes. These women and men were the first cohort of Jewish day school graduates. Owing to different backgrounds, their religious observance and intellectual expectations varied from their parents'

way of life. They were eager to encounter a more sophisticated discussion and guidance on issues that mattered to them. These included Communism, Cold War politics, and [Civil Rights](#).

Yet, none of these themes dominated Rabbi Lamm's sermons and writings more than family life. His concentration on the family is also striking for its socially conservative bent. On other religious matters like liberal education, Zionism, and interfaith dialogue, Rabbi Lamm held a centrist position, neither fully in line with the rightward Agudath Israel stance, nor the leftward point of view espoused by Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, among others.

The Jewish home was different. Rabbi Lamm's domestic conservatism bespoke a rigidity intended to keep Orthodox Judaism apart from a rapidly changing postwar American culture. His views fit neatly alongside other traditional-minded religious leaders of that age.

For Rabbi Lamm, the home represented a constant, an anchor of religious authenticity that permitted serious-thinking Orthodox Jews to responsibly experiment with ideas like Zionism and liberalism without loosening their foothold in religious traditionalism. The family was therefore the singular monument in Jewish life that could not change one bit, no matter how much modernity nudged it to move in that direction.

Tradition and Family

The challenges to the traditional family did not begin in the 1960s. Declining birth rates, increased instances of divorce, and more complex modes of sexuality loomed in American life long before the 1960s and the Sexual Revolution. Historians [Riv-Ellen Prell](#) and [Rachel Gordan](#) have shown that this was the case for Jews in the United States, as well. Nonetheless, the Sixties increased the commotion as social scientists tabulated steeper inclines and declines in directions that concerned—often terrified—advocates of the traditional family, Orthodox Jews included.

They also worried about the new environs of the American family. The untested suburban frontier and more upscale urban neighborhoods frightened Jews of all stripes. These places were beyond the supervision of the "old guard." There, religion could take on many hybrid forms. Expectations about social interactions and relationships were also placed on unsteady ground in these locales. For instance, Benjamin Steiner has [shown](#) that "radical" measures taken by Conservative leaders on behalf of *agunot* were motivated by concerns over the state of the postwar Jewish nuclear family.

Orthodox Jews were also deeply troubled by the moral values and religious ethos of the so-called [crabgrass frontier](#). On occasion, Orthodox educators and rabbis indoctrinated their students with these fears. Here are the [sentiments](#) of a member of the Torah Vodaath High School Class of 1955:

But even in America Jews have and still are spreading out in remote cities and villages, thereby losing contact with the core of Jewish life which had been established in New York. In these small towns they are at present falling prey to the rapidly gaining Conservative movement and are forgetting the principles and ethics for which their parents and grandparents forfeited their lives a mere decade ago.

These feelings did not halt Orthodox migration to the suburbs. Nor did remaining in older neighborhoods prevent the permeation of family and sexuality discourse. Instead, many Jews—Conservative, Orthodox, and Reform—cautiously settled into their new

environments, [constantly reminding](#) their coreligionists of the traditionalist ethic learned from their immigrant, urban experiences. Orthodox leaders were especially committed to this social conservatism. They were compelled to fashion a rhetoric that “inoculated” their followers from the perils of a less prudish postwar American society.

Rabbi Lamm on the Family

Rabbi Lamm claimed that all of this was stirred by a maelstrom of cultural subjectiveness. It defied the Orthodox religious instinct to search for order and remain obedient to a system of Jewish law. Rabbi Lamm therefore viewed it as his mission to stymie the so-called New Morality and its doctrine, as he once defined it: “all that really counts in human relations is that the relations be human; that no relationship ever be such as to hurt or offend another and that, on the contrary, the purpose of all activity be the entry into ‘meaningful personal relationship.’”

For him, the 1960s had ushered in a corrupt code of ethics, a “misguided cult of moral mediocrity only barely redeemed by its ethical motif.” Orthodox leaders agreed that their flocks were less tethered to traditional sensibilities, ideas that, as an ideal anyway, most rabbis had taken for granted. Rabbi Lamm figured that it behooved his trendy West Siders to listen to these lessons, knowing that many of them encountered these forces, or might end up under the [heavier influences](#) of the “sophisticates of suburbia.” Their Judaism, he reckoned, was far stronger if their homes conformed to a traditional ideal.

From the Pulpit

The major challenge to reach the rank-and-file was to create a more compassionate and less aloof Orthodox pulpit. Years after departing The Jewish Center pulpit, he recalled the state-of-affairs at the well-heeled congregation. Sermons and classes at The Center, he alleged, did not touch the personal and sensitive chords that Rabbi Lamm aimed to address.

The synagogue “was a very stuffy place when I got there,” he remembered in the 1980s. Rabbi Lamm’s response was to furnish a more welcoming atmosphere, to discuss the social issues that mattered most to an up-and-coming generation of Orthodox Jews. “I tried very hard to warm it up a bit,” he explained, “without sacrificing the attractiveness of formality.”

Focusing on the family offered that down-to-earth feel. His crusade on behalf of the family was evident. One of the five sections in Rabbi Lamm’s first collection of sermons was dedicated to “The Family.” There, he defended the “Jewish Mother,” chastised the detached “Jewish Father,” and railed against modern impulses to lighten up on child rearing. In May 1969, he fired lots of brimstone at Philip Roth and his new novel, [Portnoy’s Complaint](#). Roth’s sexually provocative novel transformed him into an American celebrity, a notion that gave The Jewish Center’s famed pulpiter great cause to shut him out of the congregation’s unofficial reading lists.

His efforts extended beyond The Jewish Center. Rabbi Lamm tried to do the same for the young people who encountered him at Yavneh intercollegiate programs at Columbia University, his frequent keynotes at Orthodox Union conventions, and in the classrooms of Yeshiva College.

Publishing a Message

Rabbi Lamm spent significant time writing on these matters. Perhaps his most important contribution on this score was on behalf of the

Rabbinical Council of America and its organ. In the second issue of *Tradition*—a journal he founded in 1958—Rabbi Lamm [defended](#) the *mehitzah*. The seating configuration of the synagogue was crucial for Orthodox Jews. It [represented](#) one of the emerging points of division between theirs and the Conservative congregations. Orthodox advocates had expended much energy arguing for the *mehitzah*’s importance vis-à-vis Jewish law. Rabbi Lamm rehearsed these points, but his message, in the main, concerned the “social and psychological” aspects of separate synagogue pews.

The synagogue was a place for intense retrospection and holiness. Mixing the sexes was counterproductive. To him, “as long as men will be men and women will be women, there is nothing more distracting in prayer than mixed company.” Instead, separateness, at least in the synagogue, was a means of negating the raging cultural influences of the world beyond its walls. It was a means of controlling the “frivolousness” and “bashfulness” that stood in the way of a sincere religious encounter with God.

What is more, Rabbi Lamm felt compelled to [rebut](#) the popular Christian adage: “The family that prays together stays together.” For him, the home was the appropriate place to cultivate family togetherness:

During the week each member of the family leads a completely separate and independent existence, the home being merely a convenient base of operations. During the day Father is at the office or on the road, Mother is shopping, and the children are at school. At night, Father is with “the boys,” Mother is with “the girls,” and the children dispersed all over the city—or else they are all bickering over which television program to watch. And then they expect this separateness, this lack of cohesion in the home, to be remedied by one hour of sitting together and responding to a Rabbi’s readings at a Late Friday Service! The brutal fact is that the Synagogue is not capable of performing such magic.

He therefore called on Jews to take advantage of their domestic realms to fix the ills of American family life. The synagogue’s role—one of them anyway—was to inspire its worshipers to transport its messages to everyday home life. This was a lesson that Rabbi Lamm preached regularly from the pulpit.

Beyond Modern Orthodoxy

His reach also moved past his own Modern Orthodox enclave, stretching into the Orthodox Right and, in a very different direction, the general American Jewish public. In the [pages](#) of the *Agudath Israel* monthly, Rabbi Lamm expressed astonishment over the breakdown of the American family. He dismissed Hippies and Yuppies of distorting priorities of love and marriage. He also blamed American Jewish groups, particularly the non-Orthodox.

In line with the Agudah mission, Rabbi Lamm—not at all a card-carrying Agudist—cautioned his Orthodox colleagues, no matter how much they wanted to maintain good relations with their Reform counterparts, that they could not dismiss the “havoc wrought by Reform when it abandoned Jewish marriage law” (way back, in earnest, in the 1860s). He feared the loss of a values-centered foundation established by the guidelines of traditional Jewish marriage. To Rabbi Lamm—italics included—this, accordingly, was “*probably the most irresponsible act in the recent annals of the Jewish people.*”

Rabbi Lamm's domestic conservatism also engaged the women and men who subscribed to the *Encyclopedia Judaica* yearbook. In the 1974 edition, Rabbi Lamm reinforced his views on homosexuality first articulated in a 1968 article in an OU magazine. In step with other religious leaders of conservative faiths at that moment, Rabbi Lamm pushed back against progressive Christian groups' reinterpretation of Leviticus 18:22.

Many Happy Returns

In December 2007, the Yeshiva College student newspaper dedicated space to celebrating Rabbi Lamm's eightieth birthday. Aptly titled, "Happy Birthday, Rabbi Lamm," the editorial was meant to offer an honest accounting of the newly minted octogenarian's legacy, of a Jewish leader who understood that satisfying everyone was not an option:

Creativity was his mark, and it led to both cheers and boos. He took original positions that made him a hero for many and possibly too original for others ... His conception of Torah u-Madda has comforted many, while appearing elitist and impractical to others. Undaunted by conventionalism and critics from inside and outside Yeshiva, Rabbi Lamm has always made sure to be candid with his thoughts and remarks, and never too shy to offer comments to which he knows that some will scoff.

Ten years later, Rabbi Lamm is ninety and we might draw a different lesson. Most central to Rabbi Lamm's Orthodox creed were aspects of Jewish life that he had long ago tied to the home and family. Whether his 1960s conceptions of this theme jibes with modern sensibilities is besides the point. This was how he earnestly and boldly expressed religious authenticity to his congregants and young followers. That conviction earned him much respect. The rest was just commentary.

Happy birthday, Rabbi Lamm.

CREATION IN A CHAOTIC DECADE: RABBI LAMM IN THE 60S

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Editors' Note: This was one of three articles in a Lehrhaus series in honor of Rabbi Norman Lamm's ninetieth birthday, observed on December 19, 2017.

The Any reflection on the career of Rabbi Norman Lamm must start with his efforts in the 1960s to reinvigorate Orthodoxy on the Upper West Side and more generally in New York City. A proper account of that era and Rabbi Lamm's efforts and achievements must start with an understanding of the condition of Orthodox Judaism in New York City when, in 1958, Rabbi Lamm returned to New York to become a rabbi at The Jewish Center. In that same year, he founded the journal *Tradition*.

The Upper West Side in the 1960s

In the 1960s, The Center struggled with an image of exclusiveness or worse, *bar or bat mitzvahs* were rare occasions, and there were few toddlers or grade school children. The earlier vibrancy of the community which had prompted Rabbi Leo Jung to attempt establishing a day school in the 1930s had waned. Rabbi Jung himself was still a leading figure in the Orthodox world, as one of the small group of rabbis who had rescued Orthodoxy in America in the pre-World War II world from disappearance. But he could not maintain the vigor physically or intellectually that had been his. More importantly, he could not fight the demography of the area. The area was no longer the attraction to Jews, and particularly to Orthodox Jews, that it had once been.

The leadership of The Center recognized the problem and sought by various means to attract a greater number of young people to The Center. Committees were formed, special home evenings were created, dues structures were altered, all with the hope that more young families would come to The Center and find an area where they would be comfortable. The image that The Center services projected, the "optics," if you will, did not help. Coming into a synagogue where officers and rabbis wore striped trousers and top hats—as they still do—was not what young people wanted. Matched with the formalism—which Rabbi Lamm himself later termed the "sacred choreography"—was a "club-like" feeling ("you're sitting in my seat"). As a result, young people looked elsewhere.

The West Side was poised for some kind of change. Rent control had kept most people locked in their apartments with their unimaginably favorable rents, but there was area deterioration. By way of example, the Hotel Endicott on Columbus and 81st Street, a structure dating back to the Civil War, had descended to single room occupancy where on the average a murder a month took place. It was thought simply dangerous to walk up Columbus Avenue. We joked that the new Police station on 82nd Street was to make response to the murders easier, but no one let their children walk to the bus past that block.

As a result, families started to move from the area, primarily to the upper East Side, but to the nearby suburbs as well. If one needed an emblem of this trend, one could point to Temple Israel, a Reform congregation with a huge structure on 91st Street and Broadway, which was sold to Young Israel at a bargain price.

As further indication of the demographic dismay facing the area, at one point, The Center explored the possibility of itself moving to a new location on the East Side. A later “fantasy” during Rabbi Lamm’s tenure involved a plan to have the City condemn a large super block which would house a relocated Yeshiva University and revitalized residential buildings, similar to what had been accomplished for Fordham University in the lower “60s” on the West Side. Neither plan came to anything, but they serve to demonstrate the feeling of many in the community of the downward trajectory of the area.

Rabbi Lamm and The Jewish Center Revival

My credentials to recall this story are as follows. I was privileged to know Rabbi Lamm first as congregant when he served as assistant rabbi at Kehilath Jeshurun, then as congregant and officer at The Jewish Center to which he returned from Springfield, Massachusetts in 1958, and concurrently as the first Managing Editor of *Tradition*, the journal which he founded in 1958. The two achievements of the 1960s era of Rabbi Lamm were his rabbinate at The Jewish Center and his editorship of *Tradition*.

It was to a somewhat struggling institution that Rabbi Lamm arrived in 1958, serving as second in command to Rabbi Jung. He set about to do everything possible to revitalize the synagogue and make it attractive to young people and young families. Beyond establishing a variety of educational programs, he did so primarily by strong and popular Shabbat sermons. The sermons dealt with every contemporary topic imaginable and did so in a style drawing on *midrash* or halakhic sources which could be comprehended by all, even those with limited Jewish text background. This last point was crucial, as this was before the spread of day schools or the idea of a supplementary gap year program in Israel.

His sermons were well prepared and developed, up to preparation of the full written text. (I know because my parents badgered him each week for a copy of his sermon, the mass of which they retained and which I returned to Rabbi Lamm after my mother’s passing. The collection managed to fill in the set ultimately housed on YU’s [Lamm Heritage](#) website). The sermons covered events of the day, politics, social currents, challenges to Israel, challenges to religious observance, without limit. And they filled the synagogue week after week.

Rabbi Lamm’s rabbinate was not without its challenges and tensions, as Rabbi Jung sought to continue his full complement of rabbinic and pastoral activity, sometimes eclipsing the position of Rabbi Lamm. As a result, the lay officers, with the strong leadership of Max Stern, were sometimes called in to “mediate” sermon schedules or other such matters, something which neither they nor either of the two rabbis relished.

As a result of his rabbinate, however, by the time Rabbi Lamm left for Yeshiva University in 1976, The Center was on the way to becoming the central place which it now occupies in the rejuvenated—in all senses of the word—area of the Upper West Side. It was a remarkable achievement and must be appreciated in its historical context.

The Formation of *Tradition*

Rabbi Lamm’s other significant enterprise in that decade or two was *Tradition*. In the immediate postwar period, the academically educated and English-speaking Orthodox laymen did not have access to sophisticated journals and other sources, certainly not to the extent that they are available today. There were relatively few publications in English which would interest or sustain an educated

reader who was interested in traditional Judaism and educated in secular skills.

It was in this context that Rabbi Lamm founded *Tradition* in 1958. He continued as its editor until 1962. It was not an easy task to find authors and articles who could be provocative and interesting without giving offense to one group or another. Circulation was always a struggle and financing—mostly from the Rabbinical Council of America—was not overly generous or sustained.

In starting the journal, Rabbi Lamm stated as its goal and function “to interpret the Tradition, the Word of God, the heritage of Torah and mitzvot in a manner and form that the modern, educated, thinking Jew can understand.” He wrote some of the important articles himself and got other known scholars and rabbis to contribute, as well. While the circulation was never vast, its influence as the first such regular publication cannot be underestimated.

All that we have today (and maybe there is even too much of it) can be traced to the idea of the journal and its acceptance by the community.

A reflection on Rabbi Lamm and the 1960s would not be complete if it did not include the fact that it was during that decade that Rabbi Lamm obtained his doctorate under Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s supervision, and managed to serve as effective father to a wonderful family. His later accomplishments at Yeshiva University extended and expanded the achievements which had been seen during the decade of the 1960s.

May Hashem give him further years of health and *nahat*.

DOES THE TORAH CARE ABOUT YOUR FEELINGS?

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How do we Conservative political pundit Ben Shapiro is known for his famous mantra, "[Facts don't care about your feelings.](#)" The point, as I see it, is this: when it comes to understanding the world, we should defer to objective reality as opposed to relying on how we feel about it. We also should not expect those who do rely on objective data to alter their thought processes in order to conform to our personal preferences.

I have heard similar sentiments expressed in the context of Judaism, especially in relation to Jewish law. In fact, when Ben Shapiro spoke at Yeshiva University in 2016, the introductory speaker remarked that a rabbi in a Judaic Studies class once answered a question with a variation of Shapiro's mantra: "[The Halakhos don't care about your feelings.](#)"

Not having been in this class at the time, I cannot comment on the context in which this statement was made. However, I believe it is important to critically evaluate the role of emotions in Biblical and Rabbinic Judaism. As we will see, the categorical statement "Halakhah doesn't care about your feelings" is simply incorrect and can even lead to distortions of Torah.

On the other end of the spectrum, a halakhic ideology that frames decisions entirely through the prism of emotions would be equally problematic. An emotional approach to Halakhah can provide a needed corrective, but as we will also see, it is no less susceptible to its own distortions of Judaism.

Concern for Other People's Feelings

While obvious and hopefully uncontested, we must still acknowledge that Halakhah demonstrates concerns for people's feelings in interpersonal relationships. Embarrassing another individual is a particularly grievous transgression, so much so that it is even compared to murder ([Bava Metzia 58b](#)). Someone who embarrasses his fellow in public, even if he has Torah and good deeds, has no portion in the world to come ([m. Avot 3:11](#), [Sanhedrin 99a](#)). This principle against humiliating someone even applies when rebuking someone who has committed a capital offense ([Bava Metzia 59a](#), [Sanhedrin 107a](#)). Humiliating another in public is so severe, we learn, that it is "better [for] a person to throw himself into a fiery furnace and not embarrass his friend in public" ([Berakhot 43b](#), [Ketubot 67b](#), [Sotah 10b](#)).

We also find a related concern against honoring oneself at the expense of another's humiliation in [Megillah 28a](#). R. Yosi b. Haninah similarly states that one who does this also has no share in the world to come ([y. Haqiqah 2:1 77c](#)).

Aside from the warnings against public embarrassment, we also find a prohibition against *ona'at devarim*, "afflicting with words," based on [Leviticus 25:17](#). Under this prohibition, one cannot tell a penitent person to "remember your earlier deeds," nor can one tell the son of a convert to "remember the deeds of your (gentile) ancestors" with an intent to shame. Similarly, one cannot tell someone who is suffering that they are only suffering due to their sins. The Talmud continues that verbal affliction is even worse than monetary affliction. R. Shmuel b. Nahmani goes as far as to say that unlike

monetary affliction, verbal affliction has no restitution ([Bava Metzia 58b](#)).

I will conclude this section of examples where Jewish law is concerned with other people's emotions by citing Hillel's formulation, "That which is hateful to you—do not do (to another). This is the entire Torah, and the rest is commentary. Go and learn" ([Shabbat 31a](#)). Alternatively, as R. Eliezer puts it, "The honor of your friend should be as dear to you as your own" ([m. Avot 2:10](#)).

Halakhic Accommodations for People's Feelings

A more interesting question to ask is this: to what extent does Jewish law accommodate people's feelings or even change the standard practice in response to people's feelings? Here, too, we find several examples.

One instance of a ritual being modified for inclusive purposes is the practice of women laying their hands on a peace offering before the sacrifice. The Talmud states explicitly that women laying their hands on the animal has no legal or ritual significance, but it was done for the sole reason of making the women happy ([Haqiqah 16b](#)). Here we are presented with a case of halakhic neutrality—there was no requirement to allow women to participate in this act, and there were no adverse halakhic consequences to allowing their participation either. Thus we find no issue with a personal accommodation in such a case.

In addition to permitting an accommodation, we also find positive decrees enacted in order to prevent or alleviate a person's mental anguish. We do not inform a sick person of a loss in the family lest his mind be disturbed, which presumably would interfere with his own health ([Mo'ed Katan 26b](#)). A condemned person on his way to execution is given a special potion for the purpose of relieving his anxiety ([Sanhedrin 43a](#)). Jewish law is thus even concerned with the mental state of someone who has committed a sin so grave that it necessitates capital punishment.

Sometimes the concern for people's emotional states can even override established Halakhah. Under normal circumstances, there is typically no acquisition of property on Shabbat; however, there are exceptions (e.g. [Gittin 8b](#)). One such example can be found in the case where someone is dying and cannot properly distribute his possessions. The Sages decided that his will should be carried out, even on the Sabbath, so that his mind will not be further disturbed and worsen his already weak condition ([Bava Batra 156b](#)).

We also find accommodations for physical discomfort, as in the case of someone who is an *istinis* (in a delicate state). This is why Rabban Gamliel bathed on the first night after his wife passed away, even though he was in mourning ([m. Berakhot 2:6](#)). R. Sheshet fasted on the day before Passover, which the Talmud attributes to his delicate digestive system ([Pesahim 108a](#)). R. Yehoshua b. Levi ruled that a delicate person could wear slippers on fast days due to their condition, a dispensation that would not be applied to healthy people ([y. Yoma 8:1 44d](#)).

We also find exceptions where people may decline to fulfill an obligation because they feel it violates their *kavod*—that is, it is beneath their dignity. [Deuteronomy 22:4](#) commands that one must return a lost object, but the Talmud qualifies that an elderly person for whom returning the lost object would be undignified is exempt ([Sanhedrin 18b](#)). Rabbinic sages also balance their honor with their obligations. For monetary cases, the honor of a sage exempts him from testifying when the judge is inferior to him in wisdom. However,

he is obligated to testify in a case involving a religious transgression because, as it says, “No wisdom, no prudence, and no counsel can prevail against God” ([Proverbs 21:30](#)), and “Where there is a desecration of God’s name, we do not consider the honor of the rabbi” ([Shevuot 30b](#)).

I cannot provide a formula for when a person’s honor may override a religious obligation. However, the fact remains that discrete examples exist such that we cannot dismiss such accommodations as a halakhic impossibility either.

Commanded Emotions and Emotional Regulation

Thus far, we have seen several examples where the Torah demonstrates concern for people’s emotional discomfort. These examples range from prohibitions against causing emotional distress to accommodations and dispensations from following strict Halakhah. The latter category may give the impression that the Torah views emotions as fixed characteristics to which Halakhah must adjust. However, we also find examples where the Torah either commands one to feel certain emotions or at least demands one to regulate particular emotions.

There are Biblical commandments to love God ([Deuteronomy 6:5, 11:1](#)), to love converts ([Leviticus 19:34, Deuteronomy 10:19](#)), and of course, to “love thy neighbor as thyself” ([Leviticus 19:18](#)). This final commandment immediately follows an emotional prohibition against “hating your brother in your heart” ([Leviticus 19:17](#)).

Whether these commandments truly mandate how a person must or must not feel is the subject of a classic debate [summarized by R. Baruch Gigi](#):

There are essentially two main approaches to the question of commanding emotions. The first approach argues that it is possible to demand that a person alter and control his emotions; the second approach argues that this is impossible, and any discussion regarding a command of this nature must shift to the realm of behavior and actions.

According to the second approach, we do not control our emotions, but we can control our actions. This interpretation would even apply to the prohibition against hating your fellow “in your heart.”

Independent of this philosophical and exegetical debate, the Talmud records several statements indicating that emotional regulation is a critical requirement for the religion.

The Divine Presence is said to only rest upon those who are not melancholy¹ or too happy with levity, but only those who experience the joy associated with fulfilling commandments ([Shabbat 30b](#)). Further, the Sages teach that people should not pray unless they are in this ideal emotional state ([Berakhot 31a](#)).

Emotional regulation applies to both pleasant and unpleasant emotions. When certain sages became too joyous at weddings, another sage had to intervene in order to reset his colleagues’ emotions. R. Ashi broke a white glass at his son’s wedding in order to keep the merriment from getting out of hand, and in a similar situation, R. Hamnuna Zuti reminded his excessively joyful colleagues of their mortality ([Shabbat 30b-31a](#)). On the other end of the emotional spectrum, we learn from Reish Lakish that anger causes

wisdom to depart from the wise and prophecy to depart from the prophet ([Pesahim 66b](#)). The *gemara* directs us to an example in the Torah where the prophet Elisha, experiencing a state of anger, needed a musician to play for him in order to ready himself for prophecy ([2 Kings 3:14-15](#)).

Managing Feelings as a Religious Imperative

Almost every worthwhile endeavor requires a degree of discipline to set aside one’s feelings and impulses in order to achieve a desired goal. In a secular context, the self-discipline needed to overcome short-term desires is virtuous. But for Judaism, self-discipline is a foundational religious requirement. Living a life dedicated to observing the commandments requires the discipline to set aside one’s immediate desires in order to perform certain actions or refrain from others.

We find several Biblical statements which contrast personal desires with fulfilling the will of God. In the commandment to affix *tzitzit* (fringes) on cornered garments, the Torah explains that these fringes serve as reminders to fulfill the commandments and not merely “follow your heart and eyes” to fulfill lustful urges ([Numbers 15:39](#)). Through the prophet Jeremiah, God complains, “They have not listened to my voice, and they have not followed it. [Rather,] they followed the stubbornness of their hearts and followed the *Ba’alim*, as their fathers taught them” ([Jeremiah 9:12-13](#)).

The second verse juxtaposes the stubbornness of prioritizing one’s desires over God’s will with committing idolatry. We find a Rabbinic analogy between idolatry and acting out of the emotion of anger. According to R. Yohanan b. Nuri, someone who rends garments, breaks vessels, or scatters money out of anger should be regarded as an idolater ([Shabbat 105b](#)). He warns: “Such is the way of the evil inclination. Today he says, ‘do this,’ and tomorrow he says, ‘do that,’ until he says, ‘worship idolatry,’ and he does so.”

R. Avin finds a scriptural basis for this idea in [Psalms 81:10](#): “There shall be no strange God in you.” From this, R. Avin derives, “Who is the strange God that resides within a person? Say this is the evil inclination” ([Shabbat 105b](#)).

Here we see the evil inclination described as its own “strange God” standing in opposition to the genuine God. Whereas God is worshipped by humans following His commands, this “strange God” is satisfied by humans prioritizing their own emotions over their obligations. Conversely, prioritizing one’s personal desires over God’s desires is considered a form of idolatry because it shifts the focus of the religion from God to the individual.

Two complementary Rabbinic statements illustrate this point. Commenting on [Psalms 1:2](#), R. Yehudah ha-Nasi teaches, “A person can only study that which his heart desires” ([Avodah Zarah 19a](#)). In context, this exposition refers to pursuing one’s intellectual interests. R. Yehudah ha-Nasi recognizes that emotional connection to material is critical for engagement and retention. He acknowledges that people will have different affinities and aptitudes toward different subjects, and he affirms (even encourages) these emotional preferences.

On the other hand, having a personal emotional preference toward one area of Torah study does not imply a right to evaluate the content based on one’s feelings. Responding to a teaching that R. Yehudah cited in the name of Shmuel, R. Nahman proclaimed, “How great is this Halakhah!” and regarding another he criticized, “this Halakhah is not great.” Rava rebuked R. Nahman by citing an

¹ C.f. [Ps. 34:19](#).

exposition of R. Aha b. Hanina on [Proverbs 29:3](#), which says, “He who keeps company with harlots will lose his wealth.” R. Aha b. Hanina interprets this verse to mean, “Anyone who says, ‘This teaching is pleasant, but this is not pleasant,’ loses the value of Torah.” Upon hearing this, R. Nahman subsequently retracts his previous statement ([Eruvin 64a](#)).

The Talmud is full of disagreements where one sage rejects the teachings of another. These disagreements occasionally lead to debates becoming heated. By contrast, Rava objects to R. Nahman bypassing the normal rules of Rabbinic rhetoric in favor of subjecting teachings to his own emotional judgment. R. Aha b. Hanina’s comparison to prostitution is apt because in both cases, the pursuit is predicated on personal gratification.

This does not imply that overcoming one’s impulses is an easy or trivial task. Ben Zoma teaches, “Who is strong? The one who can conquer his inclination” ([m. Avot 4:1](#)). Rabban Gamliel teaches two approaches to this challenge. His first approach is: “Make [God’s] will your will.” I understand this to mean that one should work to change their own will to align with God’s so that their innate desires will not stand in opposition. Rabban Gamliel continues with his second approach: “Nullify your will to [God’s] will.” I interpret this as if the first approach has not manifested—if your desires conflict with God, you must still put God’s will first ([m. Avot 2:4](#)).

Conclusion

Returning to our initial question, “Does Torah care about your feelings?” the answer is an unequivocal “yes.” Where things get complicated, however, is that the Torah “cares” in different ways. We have seen examples of the Torah caring about people’s emotional well-being through protective laws and halakhic accommodations. We have also seen examples where the Torah cares that people feel or do not feel in certain ways (or at the very least, that people manage their emotions enough to not act on them).

These conflicting sources challenge halakhic frameworks based on emotions. One cannot take the position that the Torah does not accommodate people’s feelings, nor can one contend that the Torah must always conform to satisfy emotional needs.

If I were forced to issue a categorical statement regarding the Torah’s attitude toward people’s feelings, I would say this: while the Torah sometimes accommodates people’s emotions, people should not *expect*, let alone *demand*, the Torah to conform to their wishes. We have seen examples demonstrating where Halakhah adapts to emotions, and we have also seen examples where Halakhah expects people to prioritize obedience over their personal feelings. My formulation reflects both the reality of halakhic complexity as well as the ideal religious attitude expected of practitioners.

In my rabbinic experience, people make their own decisions about how they will or will not observe Judaism. Sometimes people sincerely inquire about dispensations and will accept an honest answer, even if they personally do not like it. Others seek dispensations to validate their feelings or practices in order to continue doing as they wish without feeling the discomfort of cognitive dissonance.

The practical difference between these approaches is what people do when the answer is “no.” The theoretical difference is whether people view religion primarily as something people are supposed to serve or something which is supposed to serve the people. The Rabbinic Sages recognized this dichotomy as well when they taught,

“The wicked stand in the domain of their hearts ... but the righteous have their hearts in their domain” ([Genesis Rabbah 34:10](#)).

Judaism is neither an anthropocentric religion which places the feelings of people as its primary goal, nor is it entirely callous to people’s emotions. Exploring the nuances of emotional accommodation and whether or not it is possible is a worthy endeavor. But, in my opinion, framing the Torah through the categorical context of emotions—either for or against emotional accommodations—only distorts this complicated and important question.

REVIEW OF AFTER ADAM

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Ask American Jews about their God, and you’ll receive a variety of answers ranging from the staunchly rational to the New-Agey.

But according to [Pew’s 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study](#), most respondents will agree on one point: God is closer to an impersonal force than One with Whom people can have a relationship. In fact, apart from Buddhists, Jews are the least inclined to view God as a personal force of any religious group in America.

Enter poet and independent scholar Laurance Wieder, whose biblical saga, [After Adam: The Books of Moses](#), offers an alternative point of view. Named the 2019 Book of the Year by [John Wilson in First Things](#), *After Adam* has nevertheless been largely overlooked by Jewish critics and readers. This is to their detriment, for Wieder’s genre-bending work recenters the personal bond between the Jewish people and their intimacy-seeking God in one of the most invigorating Jewish books of recent years.

Wieder’s previous works include [Words to God’s Music: A New Book of Psalms](#) and [Isaiah’s Closing Arguments: A New Translation](#). He is also the editor of [The Poets’ Book of Psalms](#), a complete psalter composed of the work of twenty-five poets across five centuries. With *After Adam*, Wieder brings his skills as an anthologist, poet, and psalmist together to reenchant a familiar biblical text.

After Adam is a prosimetrum, a story told in verse and prose. Thus, though its subject is the Pentateuch, and the book’s 54 chapters each correspond to a Sabbath Torah portion, Wieder writes in his author’s note that it belongs to the same tribe as Dante’s [Vita Nova](#) and Sir Philip Sidney’s [The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia](#).

But Wieder’s work is not simply a poet’s retelling of the books of Moses. It is also the work of an anthologist, and much of the text is composed of biblical commentaries—largely, though not exclusively, *midrashim*—from a vast variety of texts spanning the apocryphal book of Enoch to the philosophical dialogues of Judah ha-Levi. Following the associative mode of Nobel Laureate S.Y. Agnon in [Present at Sinai](#), Wieder intermixes his commentaries with little regard for their original context or chronology. (One memorable chapter juxtaposes references to the midrashic collection of [Numbers Rabbah](#), Sun Tzu’s [Art of War](#), Bialik’s [Book of Legends](#), and [The Guide to Serving God](#), a medieval tract by Abraham Maimonides which details the path of a person striving to go beyond the minimal

requirements of Jewish law to experience a strong sense of intimacy with God.) Like Agnon, he sometimes alters sources—abridging, paraphrasing, even extending—without making his readers aware of his changes. Other times, he offers commentary that is entirely his own.

Wieder's unregimented method may strike some readers as brash, but it comes part and parcel with a larger thesis: that Torah—which for Wieder includes legend, commentary, and interpretation—exists outside of history. This claim has a precedent of sorts: The phrase “*ein mukdam u-me’uhar ba-Torah*,” literally “there is no early and late in the Torah,” is frequently invoked by Torah commentators to explain apparent chronological inconsistencies within the biblical text, but Wieder's approach greatly expands the idea. With it, he argues that all Torah is enduringly relevant and therefore capable of speaking to and from a context not its own.

Even those not convinced by this argument may take solace in the fact that Wieder's individualistic approach never degenerates into chaos or mere whim. Rather, his selections are drawn together by a strong guiding vision—one might say a theology—which, more than anything, reflects the voice and worldview of a psalmist.

The Book of Psalms envisions a world in which God listens and responds to the calls of human beings. The varied forms of the psalms—praise, lament, thanksgiving, individual, communal—all rely on the assumption of continued divine love for, and involvement in, the world.

This view, though well represented within the Jewish rabbinic and mystical traditions, has nevertheless been often overlooked in the Books of Moses in favor of readings that are (a) inspired by Christian approaches, and therefore tend to view the Old-Testament God as a wrathful, distant, or vengeful being; or (b) overwhelmed by Jewish rationalist branches, which emphasize God's ineffability and transcendence to the exclusion of personal relation.

With *After Adam*, Wieder challenges his readers to engage the Pentateuch through this psalmic lens. This is a book that believes that God—specifically, the God of the Pentateuch—exists in loving relationship, not just with the people of Israel, but with individuals. The theme of continued divine relation permeates the entire text, even in areas where it isn't immediately evident, and informs both its poetic and anthological elements.

Take, for example, one of the text's most initially striking features: the great number of commentaries featuring the fantastical and bizarre. Wieder's Pentateuch is populated by jealous angels, lustful demons, floating mountains, and even an adamantite worm, said to have been created at twilight on the first Sabbath, which can cut through diamonds with scribal precision. Even those well-versed in midrash will likely find new wonder among Wieder's selections, which come not only from Tannaitic and Talmudic sources, but also from Yemenite legends, hasidic treatises, and medieval Jewish spells.

Within the context of the text, these magical commentaries function partly to add texture and vibrancy to familiar stories. But they also serve the theological agenda at the heart of the biblical saga, for all the selections paint a picture of a universe in which the divide between the divine and human worlds is porous, and inhabitants of the two frequently interact.

Consider, for example, the following *midrashim*, which discuss the events surrounding *Matan Torah* (the giving of the Torah). Wieder writes:

The moment Israel heard the “I” of the “I am the Lord your God”—the first word of the Ten Commandments—their souls left them.

That first word returned at once to the Creator and said, “Master of all, you live and last.”

“The Torah lives and endures. Why send me to the dead? Can they hear?”

So, for His people's sake the One returned and sweetened the “I.” He tuned his voice to the strength of each listener—young, old, little ones, infants, grown men and women—so each heard only so much as he could bear. . .

In another version, after Israel's souls decamped, the angels began to hug and kiss and reassure them, cooing, “What's this? Don't fear, you children of the Lord your God;” while the Maker repeated his word softly, saying, “I am your God as you are my beloved.”

He coaxed until their souls returned.

This brief selection does a striking amount of work for Wieder's effort to detail the modes of relation between man and God. In just a few paragraphs, it reframes the moment of law-giving—which in the biblical text is solemn and awe-inspiring—as also a personal and deeply intimate act between God and the Jewish people.

Indeed, the idea of God and Israel as lovers—an image at the heart of both the rabbinic reading of Song of Songs and portions of Psalms—is woven throughout the best parts of this book. Wieder doesn't force this interpretation on all areas of the text, nor does he ignore the portions of the Hebrew Bible that suggest periods of strife or anger. Rather, *After Adam* reframes these episodes within the paradigm of the Song of Songs and the prophetic books, in which God's anger is that of one whose lover has gone astray, but will be redeemed, and their love rekindled.

Indeed, many of the book's most affecting moments are those that address the portions of the Books of Moses where Wieder's loving, personal God seems to be the most distant.

Take, for example, the sin of Golden Calf. After Israel's sin, God's fury, at least according to the biblical dialogue, is unmistakable. “Let Me alone,” he says to Moses, “that My wrath may wax hot against [the Israelites], and that I may consume them...” (Exodus 32:10). It is worth noting that the sin of the Golden Calf was used as key evidence in early Christian supersessionist claims that the covenant between God and Israel had been broken and that the Jews no longer constituted the true Israel.

But look at how this moment is reread in Wieder's account (derived from *Exodus Rabbah*), which supplies the record of an additional conversation between Moses and God following Israel's sin:

Atop Sinai, the Lawgiver [Moses] argued that God should not destroy Israel, but forgive them.

God said, "Moses, I have already taken an oath, and I cannot retract an oath which has gone from my mouth."

Moses countered, "Maker of All, you taught me that, when a man vows a vow or swears an oath he shall not break his word, but another may absolve him." Moses wrapped himself in his sage's cloak and sat while God stood before him as does the petitioner asking the rabbinic court for annulment of a vow.

Huna son of Aha remarked, "It was very hard for Moses to annul God's vow."

Rabbi Yohanan agreed, "Very hard. Moses had to ask, 'Do you regret?'"

"God answered, 'I now regret the evil which I said I would do unto my people.'"

"Then Moses ruled, 'Be it absolved for thee. Be it absolved for thee. There is no longer oath nor vow.'"

Simeon ben Laqish added, "Because Moses absolved God's vow, in Psalm 90 he is called a man or spouse of God."

Another proposed that Moses was called God's spouse because he was like a husband who, if he wants to, cancels his wife's vow, and if he wants to keep it, lets it stand.

In this midrash, the almighty judge becomes the petitioner, and the human is given the power to annul God's vow. With the final suggestion that Moses is acting the part of God's spouse, God is cast in the passive role, and Moses in the agentive. One who has been reading Wieder's work up to this point, cannot help but recall a Rabbinic quote he brought earlier, when describing why Isaac allowed himself to be bound by the aged Abraham: "Love upsets the natural order, and hate upsets the natural order."

After Adam is a project of such scale and ambition that it is difficult to imagine it succeeding, until it does. Not only does Wieder offer a much-needed corrective to Jewish ideas of a distant, impersonal God, but he does so while reinforcing the centrality of Aggadah to biblical interpretation, all while managing to maintain the integrity and artful flow of the biblical narrative.

That said, there are moments when Wieder's execution misses its mark. In combining poetry and prose within a single text—and by refusing to give either primacy—the work promises to echo the ideal balance of law and legend, Halachah and Aggadah, fear and love. Key to the prosimetrum form is that both elements of the text add something unique to the conversation between them.

But the poetry in *After Adam* doesn't always pull its weight. Through *midrashim* and other prose commentaries on the biblical text, Wieder draws out the personal, loving God of the books of Moses and of the Jews. The problem is that the book's sections of extended verse are primarily made up of psalms espousing similar ideas. These are loosely translated, sure (many are culled from Wieder's text [Words to God's Music](#)), and often arranged as dramatic monologues spouting from the mouths of biblical characters, but they are still psalms in both form and function—narrating the speakers' emotional turbulence as they grasp for intimate relation with the divine.

Thus, the poems, which are mostly situated at the close of various chapters, arrive to do a job already done. The effect is that the poems appear as awkward appendages—almost like exclamation points—on an otherwise a cohesive text.

Despite this flaw, with *After Adam*, Wieder has accomplished the feat of making the Books of Moses feel simultaneously foreign and familiar, the well-trod words imbued with new meaning.

In his forward to *After Adam*, Wieder describes the "traditional, lay-led *minyan* reading aloud from the Torah scroll every Saturday morning" as a group of "Jewish Arcadians, gathering to recount the living history in tale and song." And living history Wieder shows the Pentateuch to be, for *After Adam* does not merely advance philosophical and theological claims about the personal nature of Jewish relation with the divine, but enacts them. Though Wieder rarely inserts himself explicitly into the text, *After Adam* is in one sense a deeply personal account of one scholar's engagement with God's living word, a revelation.

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