



CONTENTS:

- Lehrhaus Editors (Page 1)
- Sinensky (Page 4)

Parshat Vaethanan

LETTER TO THE EDITOR: RESPONSE TO LEEAD STALLER

The Lehrhaus Editors

Dear Editor,

I read with interest the [recent article in the Lehrhaus](#) by Rabbi Leead Staller on Halakhah and Euthanasia and would like to address several points.

1. Rabbi Staller writes, "For one familiar with halakhic literature, it is surprising to see a halakhic question discussed in such abstract and theological terms—instead of in terms of text or legal precedent. Nevertheless, that trend is common when it comes to questions of euthanasia in Halakhah." In fact it is not surprising at all

for two reasons. One is that end of life ethics is a relatively new question in Halakhah. Until about a hundred years ago with the discovery of penicillin there was little that doctors could do to extend the life of a patient. In fact, the main proof that Rav Moshe Feinstein brings for his landmark *teshuvah* on the permissibility of withholding care in terminal patients who are suffering is based on the Talmudic story of the death of Rebbe (*Ketubot* 104a, quoted in *Igrot Moshe Hoshen Mishpat* 2:73) because there were no halakhic sources available to him on which to base his position. (For more on the relevance of this story to an end of life Jewish ethics, see my article, "[Nomos and Narrative](#)")

[in Jewish Law: The Care of the Dying Patient and the Prayer of the Handmaid,"](#)

Modern Judaism. 33, no. 1 (2013): 56-74.)

The Talmud did not discuss the issue because it was not relevant. Second, as I will discuss, it is patently obvious to all Jewish authorities that one is not allowed to intentionally hasten a person's death. The idea of easing suffering is, however, discussed in the Talmud. For example, the gemara in *Yevamot* 37a maintains that even someone sentenced to death by a Jewish court should die with minimal suffering based on the obligation to love your neighbor like yourself.

2. In discussing the story of the martyrdom of R. Hanina ben Teradyon, Rabbi Staller writes, "Interestingly, this case is generally invoked in the context of end of life decisions, but never euthanasia. Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Igrot Moshe Yoreh Deah* 2:174) cites this Gemara about R. Hanina ben Teradyon as a potential source to allow one to remove factors that would prolong a painful end of life, but elsewhere (*Igrot Moshe Hoshen Mishpat* 2:73) seems to reject this source as a useful model for practical Halakhah,

as R. Hanina ben Teradyon was a martyr and the circumstances were extenuating."

In fact, R. Feinstein uses this exact story to discuss euthanasia. He writes "that maybe a non-Jew is not liable for killing done for the benefit of the victim but for a Jew it is not allowed. And maybe this is hinted at by the nature of the prohibitions. By a Jew it is written 'thou shalt not kill' in any manner, even if it is for the benefit of the victim. But the prohibition of killing for a non-Jew is written in the language of 'spilling blood' and the use of spilling blood is not so applicable to killing for the benefit of the victim (*Igrot Moshe Hoshen Mishpat* 2:74.2)." This is a very surprising position postulated by R. Feinstein but one must remember that he only suggests it as a possibility to resolve the apparent contradiction in the story where the executioner was allowed to hasten R. Hanina ben Teradyon's death but not R. Hanina himself by opening his mouth and letting the fire enter.

3. My main problem with R. Staller's article is his conclusion: "The very principle that is being appealed to without strong sourcing—the absolute value of human

life—runs parallel to certain strains of Christian thinking and perhaps counter with some elements of Jewish thought." I reject his thesis that halakhic opposition to euthanasia is based on a Christian influence. Jewish thought accepts the principle of a "good death" without undo suffering but nowhere in Halakhah is euthanasia or physician assisted suicide sanctioned. And this has absolutely nothing to do with Christian influences. There are a small number of *poskim* who allow withdrawal of care (i.e. removing a ventilator from a dying patient) but no *posek* would ever sanction euthanasia. A cornerstone of halakhic thinking is that man has no right to actively end the life of another person. This could either be because life has infinite value, as Rabbi Waldenberg maintains, or alternatively, as Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits writes, it could be because [Jewish Medical Ethics](#) is based on duties not rights and there is no right to die in Halakhah. And certainly no physician has the sanction to end the life of his or her patient. This is solely under the auspices of God, not man. If the Christian position agrees with this fundamental

Jewish position, so be it, but that does not mean it arose through their influence.

Lastly, on a personal note, in my over thirty years' experience as a hospital physician who has taken care of too many dying patients, I can only sadly remember one whose pain was not able to be controlled with proper and evidence-based pain management. (With expert consultation and compassionate care, a treatment solution was ultimately found for that patient as well.) Dying patients should never suffer; a halakhic approach to end-of-life care should be to provide the highest quality palliative care available, not euthanasia or physician assisted suicide. I have also witnessed in a relatively brief time period a change in the right to die movement, which sadly confirms the slippery slope argument against euthanasia.

In some European countries, patients are now requesting physician assisted suicide simply because they have lost the will to live or feel they have already lived a complete life, a far cry from allowing euthanasia in cases of terminal illness and unrelenting pain.

[Alan Jotkowitz](#)

A RETURN TO MODERATION:

RABBI LAMM'S PASSIONATE PLEA FOR CIVILITY

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R. Norman Lamm's reputation rightly rides on his commitment to [Torah u-Madda](#). Yet throughout his life, another motif rivaled, and perhaps even eclipsed, his embrace of *Torah u-Madda*: passionate moderation. Unlike *Torah u-Madda*, which became an area of major focus only after he became President of Yeshiva University, he addressed the theme of moderation throughout his time in both the rabbinate and presidency.¹ To be clear, he emphasized that in many cases, confrontation was an absolute moral necessity. Following the Kotzker, he stressed the importance of truth and honesty, using acerbic

¹ The theme of moderation is deeply interwoven with R. Lamm's core theological commitment to monism, the notion that all reality is ultimately unified, and is closely connected to a number of other central areas in his thought. These include his commitment to Kookian harmonism, embrace of Hasidic thought and theology, preferred model for *Torah u-Madda*, and his *derekh ha-limmud* (Torah study methodology). For a treatment of the theme of monism through the prism of his *derekh ha-limmud*, which sought to integrate Halakhah and *aggadah*, see my essay, "[R. Norman Lamm's Trailblazing Talmudic Methodology](#)."

² See my "[Notes on an Unrepentant Kotzker Darshan](#)," *Tradition* 53:3 (Summer 2021): 269-278.

³ See Jeffrey Saks' important recent essay, "[The Extremes are More Consistent but Absurd](#)," in *Tradition* 53:3, where he notes that "perhaps, above all, R. Lamm presented

language at times to denounce hypocrisy.² Still, R. Lamm's calls for moderation and civility dominated his sermons, lectures, and published works.³

At present, many Americans have expressed deep consternation about rising incivility, especially [on social media](#) and [in politics](#). Today too, there are occasions when confrontation is the best path forward. Still, Dr. Lamm insisted that hostilities, physical and verbal alike, should be viewed as a last resort. A close consideration of R. Lamm's sustained yet evolving attention to this topic can therefore enhance efforts to remediate the current acerbic situation throughout the West.

This essay identifies four distinct historical stages of the evolution of the moderation motif⁴ in R. Lamm's thought:

moderationism as the first among equal characteristics of Modern Orthodoxy" (211). For similar sentiments, see also R. Saul Berman's remembrance of R. Lamm in *The Commentator*, available at <https://yucommentator.org/2020/06/in-memorial-of-rabbi-lamm-a-personal-reflection-from-rabbi-saul-berman/>.

⁴ There are many other pieces in which R. Lamm addressed themes that overlap with those presented here. Many of these have been omitted from the body of the essay due to space considerations. For the interested reader, below please find a review of additional references.

For the notion that there can be too much of even the good, see "[Too Much of a Good Thing](#)" (1971), and "[The Illogic of Logical Conclusions](#)" (1973). In the latter, he sharply critiques those who attacked Rav Goren's controversial

1. His early sermons on moderation, which appeared with regularity beginning in the early 1960s, focused on individual character development, repeatedly referring to Maimonides' Golden Mean as a foundation for explicating the importance of balancing competing values and eschewing the extremes. (Following Maimonides, R. Lamm variously referred to this as the *derekh ha-beinonit*, middle path, and the *derekh Hashem*, way of God.) His 1960s doctoral work on R. Hayyim Volozhin, whom he saw as a kindred spirit, echoed this same theme of individual moderation.
2. In the mid-1960s and 1970s, as R. Lamm became more involved in Jewish communal affairs in the United States and Israel, he extended his concern for moderation to the public domain. During this period, he expressed significant concern about the negative effects of infighting within the Orthodox community and between the various U.S. denominations, and especially about internecine religious strife and political polemics in Israel.
3. After assuming the presidency of Yeshiva University in 1976, and particularly in the 1980s, R. Lamm was subject to a series of

ruling regarding *mamzerim* (bastard children) by way of polemical personal attacks.

On the importance of achieving a proper balance between confrontation and conciliation, see "[The Calm and the Rage](#)" (1975). For his discussion of anger, the first of Maimonides' two exceptions to the Golden Mean, see "[Temper, Lost and Found](#)" (1968). On Maimonides' other exception, humility, see "[Humility: An Analysis](#)," as well as his 1981 *Hag ha-Semikhah* address, entitled "The Self-Image of the Rabbi" ([Seventy Faces, vol. 2](#), #39). He delivered an address on this topic at the 1990 Rabbinical Council of America convention. R. Lamm returned to the theme of moderation in his 1964 sermon "[Menschlichkeit](#)," emphasizing that "*menschlichkeit* is the civility that comes to a man when he realizes how great he can become and ought to become, and how little of that greatness he has achieved."

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

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

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

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

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

On the theme of "sanity" and "insanity" in public affairs, see "The Call to Sanity," delivered in 1957 and, in slightly updated form, in 1960. See too his reference to society in his sermon "[The New Morality and Ancient Egypt](#)," delivered shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

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

vicious polemics from the Yeshiva world. While the attacks were personally hurtful, they ironically led him to double down on his emphasis on the importance of *derekh eretz* and civility in communal affairs. Around the same time, as he became increasingly involved in a series of attempts to forge increased collaboration between the Jewish denominations in the United States and particularly in Israel, Lamm addressed the topic of communal harmony. This period also coincided with a series of public essays and lectures in which, addressing a now-larger audience from his perch as President, Lamm sought to capture the essence of Modern Orthodoxy, or, in his then-preferred term, Centrist Orthodoxy.⁵ In addition to [Torah u-Madda](#), Lamm singled out passionate moderation and love of fellow Jews as hallmarks of his community's core values.⁶

4. Finally, as Israeli political debates over land for peace reached a boiling point in the 1990s, R. Lamm spoke out against the

rise of religious extremism, pleaded for civility, and, following the Rabin assassination, called for communal self-introspection. Perceiving a frightening rise in religious extremism in Israel and throughout the world, he urged his audiences to accept responsibility for recovering the values of love, respect, and simple civility as antidotes to a society he saw as deeply ailing.

Early Sermons: Personal Moderation

In his early sermons, R. Lamm centered this theme of moderation on the plane of individual character development. In his 1951 sermon "[Peace and Truth: Part-Time Opponents](#)," in what he indicates was his first sermon at Kehilath Jeshurun - making it his first professional sermon - a young R. Lamm explored the balance between truth and compromise. In 1956, he returned to this motif in a Sukkot sermon entitled "[Extreme Moderation](#)." At that time, he noted, moderation and civility were highly valued in society, arguably to a fault. Lamm therefore emphasized the inverse, namely that while living a life of

⁵ See Zev Eleff, [Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History](#) (Philadelphia: JPS, 2016), 348-350; see also 354-5, 364-7.

⁶ He emphasized the theme of *ahavat Yisrael* in many published lectures and essays. For his halakhic analysis, see

["Loving and Hating Jews as Halakhic Categories,"](#) *Tradition* 24:2 (Winter 1989): 98-122, also published in Hebrew in his *Halakhot va-Halikhhot*.

moderation is laudatory, we must avoid paralysis and act firmly on our religious convictions. Otherwise, like Lot's wife, we run the risk of becoming frozen pillars of salt.

To the best of my knowledge, his 1961 talk entitled "A Sermon for the Sensitive" introduced the Maimonidean Golden Mean to his audience for the first time. The *derekh ha-beinonit*, he explained, meant that we should strive to avoid either extreme. Because most of us err on the side of sensitivity, we should devote the lion's share of our efforts toward developing a thick skin - or, as he put it homiletically, toward donning the leather of the Leviathan.⁷

By 1966, judging by one of his most programmatic sermons, "Sweet, Sour, or Salty," Lamm had worked out a fairly well-developed theory of

⁷ In his 1962 "Frankness as Vice and Virtue," R. Lamm again referenced Maimonides' Golden Mean. Here, he pointed to R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin's interpretation that from the moment they met, Isaac and Rebekah's relationship was rooted in reverence and did not permit open dialogue, even about crucial subjects such as the character of their children Yaakov and Esav. From here Lamm concluded that it is exceedingly important to build and maintain an open line of communication in interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, he counseled, "excessive frankness is... a vice and not a virtue." He astutely added that "when a friend begins a conversation with the words, 'to be brutally frank...' you may be sure that he intends brutality more than frankness." In his 1965 sermon "Sincerely Yours," echoing his remarks on frankness three years prior, R. Lamm yet again urged his congregants to strike a healthy balance between the extremes. On the one hand, he suggested,

moderation. Instead of sufficing with a citation and exhortation, here he raised an obvious difficulty with the Golden Mean: Was Maimonides recommending a half-hearted approach to Judaism, in which one was to adopt only partial observance of *mitzvot* such as Shabbat, *kashrut*, and Yom Kippur? Obviously, this was not the case. What exactly, then, did Maimonides have in mind when counseling moderation? R. Lamm explained that the *derekh ha-beinonit* governed one's interactions with others, not one's ideals or core values. One's passion and religious commitment must be as impassioned and *immoderate* as possible; it is in the realm of interpersonal relations that moderation is essential. Accordingly, he concluded, "even people with extreme views must express them moderately."⁸

sincerity is an essential trait in interpersonal relationships. At the same time, indiscriminately sharing whatever is on one's mind is equally inadvisable. To restrain ourselves from sharing everything we know in order to avoid misinterpretation, or out of respect for others' feelings, "is an act of civility, not insincerity."

⁸ R. Lamm went on to offer a homiletic interpretation of the Torah's requirement that we add salt to sacrifices: "Ideals must always follow the vision of אמת, of truth. But even then, even when we follow truth without compromise, we must keep it flavored, we must season it with a bit of salt. We must see to it that the truth we serve up is neither bland nor harsh. Salt, unlike sweet or sour additives, is not essentially a flavor added from without; rather, it enhances the flavor inherent in the food itself, it brings out the best within it. So the salt of the sacrifice, symbol of the attitude

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

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

Considering the vituperative attacks that R. Lamm had sustained by the time of the 1989 publication of the English version of [Torah Lishmah](#) (the Hebrew version had been published in 1972⁹), his further observation that "R. Hayyim retained his equanimity despite some provocations by

unscrupulous... extremists who resorted to base methods in order to malign him" (13) reads as equal parts biography and autobiography. As Lamm put it elsewhere, adding a reference that partly explains his lifelong affinity for the founder of Habad: "It was only the appearance of two distinguished personalities - R. Shneur Zalman of L[i]adi on the Hasidic side and R. Hayyim Volozhiner on the Mitnagdic - that stilled the controversy and allowed the debate to proceed in civil fashion. Both were passionate spokesmen for their respective points of view, but both operated as moderates in the best sense of the word" ([Seventy Faces, vol. 1](#), 59).

Communal Moderation

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

we must bring to Torah: it reveals the inner beauty of Torah itself."

⁹ As to the delayed publication of the English version, Lamm explained that it was due to a combination of new

scholarship that had emerged in the interim, including constructive criticisms posed by leading scholars in the field, coupled with his onerous responsibilities as President ([Torah Lishmah](#), Introduction, xiv-xv).

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

He shared these worries as early as 1965 in his sermon "Confrontation: A Parable," in which Lamm pointed to rising hostility between religious and secular Israelis. Worrying that "denunciation has taken the place of argumentation, and enmity has begun to replace amity," he confessed his fears that "Israel [was] threatened by the long-dreaded 'Kulturkampf...'" He concluded with an exquisite homiletical move, noting that the Talmudic principle of *kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba-zeh*, all Jews are responsible for one another, is taken in a Hasidic homily to derive from the word "*arev*," sweet. If we wish to successfully bear mutual responsibility without alienating our brethren, we must begin by adopting a kind disposition that emphasizes our commonalities, not our differences.¹⁰

In his 1969 sermon "Confrontation: When, Where, and How?," following a decade-and-a-half of Civil Rights struggles, and less than a year after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Lamm

outlined the situations in which public contestation was appropriate and inappropriate.¹¹ He began by observing that "a distinguishing mark of our age is what has been called 'The Politics of Confrontation' - the face-to-face encounter with forces considered immoral and corrupt, an encounter which leads to a test of will and endurance until one side wins." This took the place of "the older and more enlightened, more patient, and more rational methods that have generally made our democracy viable and famous: persuasion, compromise, petition, accommodation, and majority rule with minority rights."

Even where confrontation was deemed necessary, he insisted, "verbal onslaught" and "ego involvement" have no place; these tactics and motivations run the risk of making the situation "irreversible by hardening positions" - an insight that resonates in today's polarized environment. He cited a remark by Professor Cassuto to the effect that Moses demonstrated shrewd emotional intelligence by softening his message to Pharaoh: whereas Moses initially delivered his message in the name of "the God of

¹⁰ His 1966 sermon "The Things that Unite Us" turned to the relationship between the U.S. Orthodox and non-Orthodox communities. Rejecting the two extremes of separation and indifference, R. Lamm called for cooperation with the non-

Orthodox while simultaneously acknowledging the two groups' fundamentally irreconcilable differences.

¹¹ For his remarks on the assassination of King, see his sermon "The New Morality and Ancient Egypt."

Israel,” which suggests a large, threatening nation, he subsequently modified his words to involve “the God of the Hebrews,” an equally accurate but more modest formulation that proved less frightening to the Egyptian potentate. Such emotional intelligence in engaging with our interlocutors, Lamm suggested, would serve us very well today.¹²

In 1971, Lamm returned to the theme of mutual respect in Israeli society. In his sermon “The Religious Situation in Israel,” he registered his opinion that “the politicization of religion is responsible, in large measure, for the alienation of many non-observant Jews from Torah.” This anticipated one of his major sermons on the subject of unity in Israel, aptly entitled “Kulturkampf,” which he delivered upon returning from a 1972 visit to Israel. Observing

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

Civility and Moderationism in the Face of Public Attacks

Fast forward to the 1980s, and the divisions had come closer to home. Beset by a series of savage attacks by prominent Orthodox leaders and in the Orthodox press,¹³ Lamm not only continued calling for moderation and civility, but he also began warning against the rise of extremism. Not coincidentally, it was during this period that he preferred to refer to Modern Orthodoxy as Centrist Orthodoxy, identifying the latter with a principled embrace of moderation that he termed “moderationism.”

¹² Five months later, R. Lamm discussed a variation on the same theme of open-minded confrontation in “The Ethics of Controversy,” exploring the Mishnah in *Avot* that upholds Hillel and Shammai as exemplars of a dispute for the sake of heaven. By being “valiant advocates of differing opinions” who were willing to reconsider their opinions in the face of intellectual critique, “Hillel and Shammai teach us that we must be vigorous in the pursuit of our ideas, but never stubborn; resolute, but never relentless; incorruptible, but never immovable.”

¹³ See, for example, “Gifter Slaughters Lamm for Passover,” reprinted in Eleff, *Modern Orthodox Judaism*, 355-8. Saks, “The Extremes are More Consistent but Absurd,” [notes](#): “By the late 1980s R. Lamm was being pilloried for his advocacy of these values from the mouthpieces of the Agudath Israel, and even, in a more muted fashion, from

within more traditionalist corners of YU itself. On Passover 1988 the venerable Telz Rosh Yeshiva, R. Mordechai Gifter, targeted R. Lamm in a [speech](#) that came to be known as ‘Gifter Slaughters Lamm for Passover.’ At the same time, the Agudah’s right-wing magazine *The Jewish Observer* ran two columns penned by Prof. Aaron D. Twerski, attacking R. Lamm’s centrism for “giving the appearance of dealing with Conservative and Reform leaders with deference and dignity” (see <https://agudah.org/wp-content/uploads/1988/07/JO1988-V21-N05.pdf>). [A few years earlier](#) an unsigned editorial in that same publication cynically required a true centrist to “be equally accommodating to both extremes, or equally negative toward them both.” (see <https://agudah.org/wp-content/uploads/1984/11/JO1984-V17-N07.pdf> at page 34)”

In his address at the 1981 *Hag ha-Semikhah* (Ordination Convocation), “The Self-Image of the Rabbi” (reprinted in [Seventy Faces, vol. 2](#), #39), he focused on the proper balance between meekness and self-confidence among emerging rabbinic leaders. He went on to note the danger of what he called “the rising extremism in our times” (114), stressing the critical importance of cultivating “radical moderation” among emerging rabbinic leaders (115).¹⁴

In 1985, on the occasion of the fiftieth yahrtzeit of Rav Kook, R. Lamm delivered a number of lectures in which he stressed the balance between the new and old in the thought of Rav Kook. Lesser thinkers were not able to harmonize these two polarities, but it was precisely Rav Kook’s greatness that enabled him to achieve this greater harmony.¹⁵ R. Lamm further noted that while Rav Kook was the subject of unyielding, scurrilous attacks from his critics, he refused to “take the bait” and respond to his critics.¹⁶ As with his comments regarding R. Hayyim of Volozhin, it is hard to shake the sense that R. Lamm’s remarks

regarding Rav Kook were at once biographical and autobiographical.

R. Lamm returned to the moderation theme toward the end of his remarks in his seminal RIETS Centennial address in 1986, later published under the title “There is a Prophet in Israel” ([Seventy Faces, vol. 2](#), #41). After bitterly noting the vituperative attacks hurled upon the Rashei Yeshiva at Yeshiva University, including the Rav, he proudly proclaimed: “The greatness of our Yeshiva is that we kept to our *derekh* with strength and with courage, that we conducted ourselves with individual and institutional dignity, that we refused to reciprocate petty insults and trade invectives, but continued to relate to others according to the principles of *kevod ha-beriyot* and *kevod ha-Torah*” (131-2).

A few months later, in a 1986 address to YU alumni in Israel titled “Do Not Let the Center Collapse,” delivered in conjunction with the RIETS centennial, he argued that YU alumni, if properly organized, were positioned to introduce the

¹⁴ According to a JTA report, by 1979 Lamm was already speaking out against what he referred to as the “intolerant fragmentation which endangers the continued vitality and creativity of the Orthodox Jewish community in the United States.” See <https://www.jta.org/archive/lamm-attacks-fragmentization-among-orthodox-jews-in-u-s>.

¹⁵ For important relevant discussions of Rav Kook’s theology, see Lamm’s “Harmonism, Novelty, and the Sacred

in the Teachings of Rav Kook,” in [Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality](#), eds. Lawrence J. Kaplan and David Shatz (New York: NYU Press, 1995), 159-176; and his “‘Peace and Truth’: Strategies for Their Reconciliation—A Meditation,” in [Reverence, Righteousness, and Rahamanut: Essays in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung](#), ed. Jacob J. Schacter (New York: Jason Aronson, 1992), 193-199.

¹⁶ “Harmonism, Novelty, and the Sacred,” *ibid*.

themes of “radical moderation” and civility into Israeli society.

It is against the backdrop of such unjustified extremism that Yeshiva University must be seen as the standard-bearer of moderation in Jewish life. For YU stands not only for *Torah u-Madda* — a broader and more comprehensive vision of Torah as expressed in a particular curricular philosophy — but also for sanity and for moderation; for the conviction that Maimonides' “middle way” applies not only to personal dispositions and character traits, but also to communal conduct and public policy; for an appreciation that life is filled with ambiguities and complexities and resists black-and-white simplism...

The advocacy of moderation should never be seen as an act of weakness. Mark Twain once said: “Moderation in all things — except moderation.” The only area where we must be extreme is in the pursuit of moderation in all aspects of our communal and social life. I am in favor of “radical moderation.”

R. Lamm's pivotal writings on Centrist Orthodoxy centered on the same themes. In “[Some Comments on Centrist Orthodoxy](#)” (*Tradition* 22:3, (Fall 1986); republished in [Seventy Faces, vol. 1, #4](#)), he attributed three major principles to Centrist Orthodoxy: *Torah u-Madda*, moderation, and love of the Jewish people. Bemoaning the fact that “in today's environment, true moderation appears as an aberration or, worse, a manifestation of spinelessness, a lack of commitment” (46), he exhorted his readers to recall that in fact it is a “sacred principle” (ibid.).

He acknowledged that some may contend that Maimonides' middle path is limited only to individual character. Yet he rejected this view on the basis of a number of arguments. First, *prima facie* there is no reason to distinguish between the private and public levels; if anything, mass extremism is more dangerous than its individual counterpart. Second, Maimonides' own approach to matters of public policy, such as his tolerant attitude toward the Karaites, was characterized by precisely the sort of level-headed balance R. Lamm advocated. Third, Lamm noted that one of Maimonides' biblical sources for the Golden Mean was drawn from Abraham's path of righteousness and justice (*tzedakah u-mishpat*), which the Torah connects with his advocacy on

behalf of the people of Sodom; thus, the very source for following the middle path is drawn from a scenario of public policy! He rued the fact that “extremism is rampant... in religious life,” even as he understood that the ills of secular society tempt extreme responses.¹⁷ He acknowledged that “extremism is psychologically more satisfying and intellectually easier to handle” than Maimonidean moderation. Yet, he thundered,

Speculate on what the reactions would be to Abraham if he were to be alive today, in the 1980’s, pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah. Placards would no doubt rise on every wall of Jerusalem: “*shomu shamayim al zot...*”, the scandal of a purportedly Orthodox leader daring to speak out on behalf of the wicked evildoers and defying the opinions of all the “*Gedolim*” of our times! Emergency meetings of rabbinic organizations in New York would be convened, resulting in a statement to the press that what could one expect of a man who had stooped to a dialogue with the King of Sodom himself. Rumors would fly that the dialogue was

occasioned by self-interest—the concern for his nephew Lot. American-born Neturei Karta demonstrators in Israel would parade their signs before the foreign press and TV cameras: “WASTE SODOM ... NUKE GOMORRAH ... ABRAHAM DOESN’T SPEAK FOR RELIGIOUS JEWRY.” Halakhic periodicals would carry editorials granting that Abraham was indeed a talmid chakham, but he has violated the principle of *emunat chakhamim* (assumed to be the warrant for a kind of intellectual authoritarianism) by ignoring the weight of rabbinic opinion that Sodom and Gomorrah, like Amalek, must be exterminated. Indeed, what can one expect other than pernicious results from one who is well known to have flirted with Zionism...? And beyond words and demonstrations, Abraham would be physically threatened by the Kach strongmen, shaking their fists and shouting accusations of treason at him. And so on and so on. ([Seventy Faces, vol. 1](#), 49)

¹⁷ While it is not my focus in this essay, R. Lamm possessed a preternatural understanding of human nature, and well understood why he was fighting an uphill battle in his calls

for moderation. For our purposes, suffice it to say that it was a battle he nonetheless thought was well worth undertaking.

Acknowledging that he was not in position to sway those outside the Centrist community, he insisted that we stay true to our guns: “Let others do as they wish,” he said. “We, of our camp, must know and do better” (50).

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

directing, the conscious use of reason rather than passively following Nature blindly and supinely... The process of arriving at a determination of one’s own life and character is more important than the results” ([Seventy Faces, vol. 1](#), 57).

Responding to Religious Extremism

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

Lamm’s 1994 *Hag ha-Semikhah* address ([Seventy Faces, vol. 2](#), #43) took place just nine days after the Goldstein massacre. Alluding to the events of a week prior, he urged the newly-minted new crop of rabbis not to fall prey to religious extremists (149) and, above all, to listen to one another (151).¹⁸

But if the Goldstein massacre was deeply distressing for Lamm - recall that the former earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees

¹⁸ On the theme of listening in today’s deafening world, see “[Learning to Listen](#)” (1955) and “[Divine Silence or Human Static?](#)” (1965). See also his 2002 *Hag ha-Semikhah* address,

“A Perfect World,” published as part of a collection of *Hag ha-Semikhah* addresses entitled *The Spirit of the Rabbinate* (New York: RIETS, 2010) discussed later in this essay.

from Yeshiva College and the Albert Einstein College of Medicine respectively - the Rabin assassination was a breaking point. R. Lamm's eulogy for Rabin, and his remarks delivered at the *sheloshim*, were rife with pained, piercing calls for self-reflection and introspection on the part of the Religious Zionist and Modern Orthodox communities.

In the former ([Seventy Faces, vol. 2](#), #50), Lamm acknowledged feeling not only "shock and grief," but also "a vital element of *teshuvah... bushah*, shame." It was, after all, a religious university student who had assassinated the Prime Minister. Lamm declared, "our responsibility is to be responsible, to recognize that violent rhetoric invariably leads to violent deeds." If we do not tamp down the rhetoric, he warned, "we stand accused of having prepared the ground for the explosion of such malevolence by people of weak restraint, like a sewer blowing its cover and uncontrollably spewing forth its odious and miasmatic gases" (220-1).

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

Let us never again, in Jerusalem or in New York or elsewhere, call a respected leader

of Israel a "traitor." Let no one tolerate irresponsible individuals who dare to refer to the prime minister of Israel, no matter of what party, as a Nazi. And let us silence those raucous voices of vicious discord who declare that it is a *mitzva* to assassinate a prime minister of the State of Israel" (221)!

We must develop a new sensitivity to extremism of all kinds. When I argue against uncivil speech, it is not a matter of taste or a preference for bourgeois manners. Le style c'est l'homme. Style often reveals character. We have allowed ourselves too often the luxury of intemperate, extremist expression, and we must all band together to learn how to avoid it. We must no longer be as tolerant as we have been of strident invective and ugly epithets and hurtful hype. Neither the Right nor the Left have been careful enough in gauging the temperature of debate. All of us must rethink not our positions as much as our methods. And we must develop a new respect for simple civility. (222)

In 1998 remarks¹⁹ delivered in memory of his successor at *The Jewish Center*, Rabbi Isaac Bernstein, R. Lamm referred to what he called the Rainbow Principle, which insists that in everything there is “variation or gradations.” Most people are not purely righteous or purely evil. “*Emet*,” absolute truth, and “*keshet*,” harmony, must coexist in the messy real world we inhabit. This may be difficult, but “God gave us brains and endowed us with both the intellect and the courage to make distinctions.” We must also remain true to our own convictions “without suppressing the other party” by denying others the right to formulate dissenting opinions.

This, in essence, means that “the requirement of Judaism is moderation.” We must take Maimonides’ Golden Mean as our model, R. Lamm insisted. This, he stressed again, does not mean that we must mindlessly follow the “mathematical middle”; it rather means that we must use our intellect to carefully evaluate all considerations, to use “intellect and judgment to make [oneself] over into a better kind of human being.”

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

Just a month-and-a-half before the turn of the century, R. Lamm delivered a [Eulogy for Dr. Yosef Burg](#), yet another kindred spirit. Burg was an accomplished scholar who committed himself to decades of public service in the Mizrahi and Israeli government, was endowed with a razor-

¹⁹ Later published as “Modern Orthodoxy at the Brink of a New Century,” *Le’ela* (Spring 1999): 8-13.

sharp, self-deprecating wit, and paved a middle path of moderation throughout his career. Whereas Lamm had drawn implicit comparisons between R. Hayyim and Rav Kook's lives and Lamm's personal experience, in eulogizing Dr. Burg, Lamm was explicit:

Most of all, we shall miss him for his essential, overarching public philosophy ~ that of moderation. Believe me when I tell you from personal experience: it is difficult to be a moderate. Extremists from both sides are often relentless and indiscriminate in their attacks; and there are even more rational people who sneer and repeat the usual platitudes as if they were revelations of new critique: moderation lacks passion, compromise is undignified, it manifests a lack of principle. There is a grain of truth in these criticisms—but when offered as blanket, indiscriminate condemnations of moderation, when the attacks are immoderate, they are wrong-headed and cannot and should not be taken seriously.

Such shallow assaults on the Burg policy of moderation—his most characteristic ambition in politics—did not deter him. He was a moderate both by disposition and by conviction, applying it in all phases of his activity—in religion, in politics, in government, and in society.

Even as he exceeded the quarter-century mark as President, and a half-century since he spoke on the tension between truth and peace in his first rabbinic sermon, R. Lamm did not tire of calling on his students to model moderation and abjure extremism. In his 2002 *Hag ha-Semikhah* address entitled "A Perfect World," delivered months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks,²⁰ Lamm again counseled the importance of listening to one another. He averred that the Talmudic teaching that Torah scholars increase peace in the world was not descriptive but prescriptive. "Rabbanim should be initiators of peace," he cautioned, "not the instigators of strife. *Talmidei Chakhamim* should teach by example that mutual insults, disrespect, and belittlement should not necessarily accompany difference of opinion; that תלמידי חכמים need not lead to מחלוקת. This is not a matter of etiquette or decorum. It is Halakha."

²⁰ R. Lamm addressed the 9/11 attacks in two presentations, one delivered on the day of the attacks and another in retrospect. The latter was published as "Twin

reactions to the Twin Towers Tragedy," in Michael Broyde, ed., [*Contending With Catastrophe: Jewish Perspectives on September 11th*](#) (New York: K'hal Publishing, 2011).

Conclusion

In his remarks ²¹ at a June 11, 2001 event celebrating the 25th anniversary of his leadership of Yeshiva University, R. Lamm reflected on his personal experiences:

In my work for Yeshiva, I benefited greatly from the decency and generosity of spirit of countless individuals. I also suffered בְּזִיוּנוֹת—insults, unfair and derogatory criticism—on behalf of you, the schools and community I love and champion—from Right and from Left.

(I consider myself an equal opportunity target!) Because of the virtue of moderation and tolerance—דְּרָכֵי נֹעַם—that I learned these 50 years, I am moved to forgive those who would never forgive me. I would suffer the slings and arrows again gladly on behalf of this cause and my people, ready to be *mekabbel yisurim be'ahavah*—to embrace suffering with love—because one never tires of defending his or her home—*be'ahavah*, with love.

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

It is for good reason that the Torah repudiated the unhealthy excesses of relativist indifference and hotheaded extremism. Passionate moderation is, after all, the way of the Lord.

²¹ His remarks were later published by YU in an 11-page softcover version under the title “Past, Present, Future.”

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