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CONTRA-DEUSAH

Below is a letter that was recently sent to the editor of the Jewish Observer last month regarding an attack on Dr. Lamm's Torah U' Mada.

January 2, 1995
Rabbi Nisson Wolpin
The Jewish Observer
84 William Street
New York, NY 10038

Dear Rabbi Wolpin:

PLEASE NOTE: NOT FOR PUBLICATION

In this letter, I would like to bring to light a particularly disturbing passage in a back issue of the Jewish Observer. More importantly, I would like to relate to you a conversation that I had with Reb Elya Svei about two weeks ago regarding this topic.

In the March 1992 issue, an article appeared entitled "Torah U'Madda" - the Book and its Ideology: a Critique" by Rabbi Yonasan Rosenblum. In this review, Rabbi Rosenblum presents a strong criticism of the book and the views presented therein. I would like to quote a specific passage from the article:

"So great is the value of Madda for Dr. Lamm that the distinction between it and Torah finally blurs altogether:

'So long as we continue to learn Scripture and Oral Law, to acquire new knowledge and to refrain from forgetting what we know, then the study of the sciences and humanities is, in effect, the study of Gemora and thus a fulfillment of the study of Torah' (p. 165)

"This conclusion leads him to entertain seriously such questions as: Should one recite birkhat hatorah on entering the chemistry lab? May one study calculus all day and thereby fulfill his obligation of Talmud Torah? (pp. 163-64)"

This assertion was the most damaging in the entire article, and after reading this passage of the review I found myself shaking my head at the excesses purportedly being espoused by Dr. Lamm in his book. I then decided to look up the passage upon which Rabbi Rosenblum based his criticism, namely pages 163-4 of Dr. Lamm's book, quoted below:

"Now, if Madda is to be accepted as included in Talmud Torah, we are presented with some immediate questions, namely: Should one recite a birkhat hatorah (the blessing mandated for the formal study of Torah) upon studying organic chemistry? Or, equally absurd, may one study

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Dr. R. M. Teicher

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(R. Lamm + Marwin Pearlman)

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calculus all day and thereby be halakhically exempt from all other Talmud Torah that day?"

It is clearly impossible to read the above quotation and maintain that Dr. Lamm "entertain[s] seriously" the recitation of Birkhat Hatorah under these circumstances.

There is absolutely no way to twist the phrase "equally absurd" into having such a

meaning. In other words, Rabbi Rosenblum has engaged in a deliberate distortion in order

to expose as ridiculous a view which he and most others in the Aguda community consider anathema to their own.

It must be reemphasized that this distortion could not be considered an "honest mistake".

The deception had to be deliberate. I found myself wondering: could I trust any other

damaging assertions regarding opinions or ideologies at variance with "Da'as Torah" in

future issues of the Jewish Observer?

In representing an ideological debate, a metaphor that is often used is "the battleground of

ideas". If the ongoing controversy concerning Torah U'Madda between the "Centrist/

Modern Orthodox" and the "Aguda" communities can indeed be characterized in this way,

then Rabbi Rosenblum has here engaged in the editorial equivalent of terrorism.

As I contrasted the assertion by Rabbi Rosenblum and the actual quotation by Dr. Lamm,

two questions came to mind, dealing with issues of halakha and Da'as Torah in such a

circumstance. First, is it permissible to deliberately distort an opinion in order to expose

the absurdity of an errant ideology? Secondly, if such a distortion is indeed permissible

under such circumstances, on a tactical level is publishing such a distortion a wise policy

for a publication such as the Jewish Observer?

Two weeks ago, I had the distinct pleasure of hosting Reb Elya Svei for Shabbos at our house (in honor of a Shabbos Sheva Brachos for his son). Being

privileged to have an opportunity for private conversation, I showed him this quote from Rabbi Rosenblum

which has bothered me so much these past years as well as the above passage in Torah

U'Madda. I then asked R. Elya the first question above ("Is it mutar to distort a krum shita

in order to make it look ridiculous?"). His verbatim answer was, "No: it's shaker, it's

shaker", while pointing to Rabbi Rosenblum's words in the JO. I then told him "With the

re'anus of the Rosh Yeshiva, I will send a letter to Rabbi Wolpin, not as a letter to the

editor, that this is the Rosh Yeshiva's opinion", and he nodded his head in assent.

recognize that there is often a tendency towards misinterpretation/
hyperbole when
recounting conversations with Gedolim. You are welcome to discuss my
conversation
with him personally to verify that indeed I am reporting it correctly.

Please note that I am not a proponent of the Torah U'Madda view; I find
Rabbi Lamm's
central arguments unconvincing.

If it is not too much trouble, I would appreciate if you could reply to this
letter personally.

Truly,