

*Forthcoming
Book in
Festival*

Norman Lamm

From: davidshatz@gmail.com on behalf of David Shatz [shatz@yu.edu]

Sent: Thursday, November 19, 2009 5:17 PM

To: Norman Lamm

Subject: Re: I Know It's Too Late...

Dear Dr. Lamm,

Naturally, I am interested! Let's discuss it further.

On Thu, Nov 19, 2009 at 5:10 PM, Joel B. Wolowelsky
<wolowelsky@yahoo.com> wrote:

I hope this finds you well.

No surprise--I enjoyed this piece very much. But, as you guessed, we :
too far along in the process to "regroup" the material and insert it. How
I am sending it on the David Shatz. As you know, he is preparing a volume
of your sermons for publication, and this should interest him too.

I am really looking forward to seeing the Haggadah in print.

Joel

--- On Sat, 11/14/09, Norman Lamm <nlamm@yu.edu> wrote:

I know it is far too late for further inclusions in my Haggadah book, but nevertheless, for the
sake of completion, here is a piece I wrote for the YU Haggadah of 2006. (I'm sorry for the
strange alphabet which somehow took the place of Lashon Kodesh...)

Norman Lamm

May 16, 2003

or 2003

*Library should have a
of the second YU Haggadah!
PITMAN.*

"THE GLORY AND CALAMITY OF HUMAN DIVERSITY"

11/19/2009

for *The Yeshiva University Haggadah*

One of the most popular passages of the Haggadah is that of “The Four Sons.” I have often wondered why I never met any of these four “in the flesh,” as it were. Is there anyone so “wicked,” so evil, that he has no redeeming feature whatsoever—even that of making the trains run on time? Is there a “Wise Son” who never committed a *faux pas*, who never uttered a foolish statement? Have we ever met a Pious Son who never sinned – in defiance of the verse in *Kohelet* (7:20) that “there is no man upon earth who [always] does good and never sins?” And the Son who does not know enough to ask – has he no modicum of intelligence at all?

After a few youthful years of having my curiosity seasonally piqued by this question, it occurred to me that these are *archetypes*, not four real, living, distinct individuals; indeed, it is extremely rare, indeed impossible, to find pure examples of these four. Almost all people are composites of two or three or four (and, in fact, hundreds of other types of “son”), and in different proportions. Were they meant to represent real people, the Tradition would most likely have identified the Wise Son, etc. Yet this not the case, except for Haggadah artists throughout the ages whose fertile imagination surpassed their intellectual acumen.

In that case, the passage on The Four Sons reflects Judaism’s acceptance of the human propensity for internal contradictions, inconsistency, ambivalence, and paradox. We are all, in some way, composites of the Four Sons in different proportions.

The complexity of human personality was clearly recognized by the Torah and the Sages throughout history. Thus, man according to *Avot de’R. Natan* (I, chap.37), is like the beasts in three ways, and like the angels in three other ways. He is partly an animal, partly a Divine Image. The moral drama of life is usually the endless battle between a man’s sense of righteousness and his concupiscence -- his *yetzer tov* and his *yetzer ha-ra*.

The Four Sons passage is not the only part of the Seder that reveals an understanding of ambivalence and paradox. Another significant example is the matzah which is considered both a sign of freedom and a sign of servitude.

Man’s rich complexity, a composite that accounts for each human as distinct and different from every other human being, has the potential for his noblest achievements as well as for his

most disgraceful failures.

In a sense, this individual differentness is surprising, given the doctrine of the creation of man in the Image of God. If we are all created in the Divine Image, should we not all be the same?

The Talmud already confronted this question: **ohelkt okm [see BIU Responsa on this, esp wnd**

ihrsvbx...]

Our differentness is our glory; it is the reflection of our creation in the Divine Image which, as mentioned, is the source of the sacredness of our individuality.

Yet there are times that this inconsistency is startling in the boldness of its internal clash, and the psychological and spiritual consequences of such contradictions do not warrant any benevolent interpretation or apology. A sin “extinguishes” a *mitzvah*, the Rabbis taught (*Sotah* 21a). Despicable conduct is not excusable by occasional or even frequent acts of goodness.

[\[1\]](#)

The Biblical Song of Songs, or *Shir HaShirim*, contains one verse that (among many others!) disturbed the Rabbis of the Midrash: Ick ,jna oIhcU I,bU,j oIhc Int Ik vryga ,rygc vnka lknc ilhm ,Ibc vbhtrU vbhtm

Check English translation

What is it that intrigued the Midrash? Here are the words of R. Hanina bar Yitzhak: “We reviewed all of Scripture and could find no reference to a crown that Bathsheba made for Solomon” (*Sh. Hashirim R.*, 3).

A most fascinating answer is provided by the eminent commentator, R. Moshe Alshekh: “the day

of his marriage” refers to the day King Solomon married the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh

"The day of the happiness of his heart" refers to the day he dedicated the Holy Temple in

Jerusalem. What a remarkable -- and disturbing -- coincidence! The king violates the cardinal

prohibition against intermarriage on the very same day that he presides over the culmination of

the historic dedication of the *Bet ha-Mikdash*! R. Alshekh adds a pertinent passage from the

Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 70b) which castigates the great king, and commends his mother who

physically punished him and bitterly reproached him: *kg unt u,tpfa snkn :h"car ouan ibjuh r"t*

uk vnrd unt :urnth uhafg 'vhv ohna trh lhcta ohgsuh kfv ///hbyc rc vnu hrc vn :k"tu 'sungv

check Soncino translation

Here he adds that *this very reproach was the "crown" she made for her son!*

If such glaring and calamitous disjunctiveness and inconstancy of character can afflict the Biblical personality hailed as "the wisest of all men," how much more so the rest of the human race!

The catastrophic inconsistency ascribed to King Solomon is shocking because of the dominating and charismatic personality of Solomon as depicted in the Torah. The Talmud (*Sukkah* 52a) avers that the greater the man, the greater his *yetzer ha-ra* -- his libidinous capacity and his powerful urges. But unfortunately the type is all too common, and is not at all restricted to eminences. Consider, for instance, the man who is generous, who helps and is courteous to friends, but proves humiliating and abusive to his wife and children. Or the one who *davens* with ostentatious *kavvanah* , but has no compunctions about cheating from his employer or deceiving his customers. Or the person who eats kosher, but does not act, talk, or sleep kosher. Regretfully, there is no dearth of illustrations of similar outrageous internal contradictions. In many such cases, the culprit possesses elements of each of the Four Sons, with the *Rasha* predominating. All of us are prone to inconsistency; it is universal and usually benevolent, but none should blandly accept the kind of clash of attributes that bespeaks a horrendous violation of one's avowed principles. Magnanimity to the synagogue building fund does not excuse intermarriage, as Solomon's mother taught him. Each act stands on its own, and the owner of the fragmented character must wrestle with his spiritually split personality.

King Solomon wore many great crowns—those of royalty and wisdom and power-- but the most meaningful of all was the crown his mother gave him: her refusal to accept his weakness as incorrigible, his inconsistencies as unsolvable, his self-indulgences as excusable because he built the magnificent and Holy Temple in Jerusalem . It was the crown of rebuke by a wise mother to beloved child whose superior wisdom failed him at the most crucial time of his life. She taught all of us that in raising children (even adult children!) we must be honest and unsparing in our criticism; our reproach may be angry but not hostile, harsh but not mean; hurting but not hating.

Equally if not more important is the mirror that she urges us to hold up before our own eyes so that we might learn when inconstancy is intolerable. Or, at the author of the Haggadah might put it, each of us has a bit of the *Rasha* within himself or herself, but we must never let out own *rish'ut* get the best of us.



[1] It is the custom, in some Jewish communities, to recite the entire *Shir Hashirim* after the Seder. The Gaon of Vilna would do it privately and secretly, accompanied by mystical experiences, as he sought to write his commentary on *Shir HaShirim*. Probably the first mention of this custom is in *Machzor Vitri*.