

A4

Home-21 for R

"THE RESPONSIBILITY OF LEADERSHIP IN
THE AMERICAN ORTHODOX COMMUNITY"

An Address Delivered at the Convention of
The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, in
Philadelphia, PA

by

Dr. Norman Lamm,
President, Yeshiva University

November 27, 1988

When I was first invited to speak at this Convention, I was unsure of what topic to choose. When I asked the conveners what I should speak about, they gave me two concise answers. First, they said, "speak about 30 minutes." Second, they recommended I speak about "The Responsibility of Leadership in the American Orthodox Community." I shall cheerfully make every effort to accomodate both wise suggestions.

The truth is that this theme has engaged and fascinated and worried me for a long time. And I have come to a rather surprising yet significant conclusion which can be summed up by saying that, in addition to and above all else, leadership requires the taking of risks--not only political and financial and social and psychological risks, but also moral risks.

There is a remarkable statement by חז"ל which is quoted by Maimonides in his פיה"מ לאבות פ"א מ"ט, although our texts do not carry this dictum as he cites it. It reads: כל מי שהציבור ממנה אותו פרנס מלמטה נקרא רשע למעלה. "One who is appointed to a position of leadership by the community here below, is regarded as wicked up above." A similar thought occurs in the Zohar (III, p.24a). On the verse אשר נשיא יחטא, "if a prince (i.e., a king, a leader) sins," the Zohar adds two words, ודאי יחטא, "he most certainly will sin!" You cannot be a פרנס or a נשיא without being considered a רשע or a חוטא.

What a strange thing to say--and what a deterrent to public service on behalf of the community! Granted that some leaders abuse their positions and that others may be neglectful of their duties, is that a reason to say that all leaders are regarded by Heaven as רשעים or חוטאים, as evil or sinful? Do we not bear enough burdens, and is there not enough to discourage us without this added onus placed upon us by the Talmud, the Zohar, and the Rambam?

What the Rabbis meant, I believe, is this: Leadership involves making hard decisions--or better: dirty decisions, choosing between alternatives neither of which is perfect or clean or pure or desirable or even acceptable, but selecting the one which is the least evil and the least harmful.

Clean decisions between good and evil, right and wrong, helpful or injurious--these are risk-free decisions and these do not require leadership. Any intelligent and reasonable person endowed with a modicum of moral judgment can make such decisions. A leader must be willing to embrace the risk of being a רשע למעלה, of being less than perfect in the abstract, of being accused of ideological error or moral truancy, if by so doing he carries out his mission of protecting the ציבור מלמטה, the interests of his community in the real world, of sparing them a greater hurt, a more serious injury, a worse moral blemish.

That is not an easy task, but that is what leadership is all about. אשר נשיא יחטא--וידאי יחטא; there is no way out. Someone who wants to play it safe and appear on the side of the angels--even if in doing so he creates an opening for the demons who will surely take over later--such a person has no right to be a leader and had best go back to his own affairs.

I can offer dozens of illustrations from my own experience, as can anyone in a position of leadership. But we have at hand probably the best and most painful example, one that has received ongoing attention at this Convention, namely, the problem that has been plaguing us especially these past few weeks and monopolizing the attention of all Israel and most of the world's media, the question of "Who Is a Jew?" We Orthodox want to amend the Law of Return to read that a Jew is not only one born to a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism, but specifically converted "according to the Halakha." The non-Orthodox are opposed to this, especially in America, because this delegitimizes their rabbis by denying them the right to perform conversions, and thus by

implication delegitimizes their congregations and thus their own selves as Jews, and so they then feel rejected by the State of Israel. And for unaffiliated Jews, this is even more critical, because Israel is one of the only things holding them together as Jews.

It is clear to me that there is no easy way out. אי לי מיצרי --we are damned if we do, damned if we don't. It is a difficult and messy decision. Those who are unprepared to examine both sides and all alternatives, who are concerned only with how they appear in the eyes of their own constituencies, who are afraid of controversy, who are unwilling to make unpopular decisions by compromising their ideological purity now in order to avoid greater disaster for the community later--they are not proper leaders. Leadership demands sober analysis of the alternatives and a determination which is less damaging, and choosing that decisively, even if it means being a רשע למעלה.

Consider our issue. On the one hand, there is no doubt and there should be no question in anyone's mind on the substantive halakhic issues. The Orthodox community, here and in Israel, and across the spectrum, is united on such fundamentals as the definition of Jewish identity and the exclusive definition of conversion as "according to the Halakha."

On the other hand, as you now well know, the reaction of the great majority of organized American Jewry has been as unprecedented as it has been unanticipated. Whether they are right or wrong, informed or misinformed (and I believe they are badly misinformed), the fact is that large numbers of non-Orthodox American Jews feel that their identification with Israel and thus their Jewishness is being questioned and rejected by Israel if this amendment is passed. They are angered, outraged, and they are ready to take revenge on all who are connected with what they see is an effort to divide world Jewry and to force the State of Israel to deny them

and their communities Jewish legitimacy. The longer this goes on, the more will they despise Orthodox Jews and hate Orthodoxy itself.

On the Talmud's dictum that תלמידי חכמים מרבים שלום בעולם, "scholars increase peace in the world," the great Rabbi of Brisk, R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, author of the "בית הלוי," comments: we see that in everyday life in our communities and congregations--as when there are various factions in a "shul" who are constantly battling with each other, at each other's throats; but as soon as the Rabbi, the תלמיד חכם, takes a position or makes a request, they gladly unite with each other in order to oppose him... So too have we succeeded in uniting a deeply divided Jewish world--against us...

So there is no really "clean" choice. Either alternative carries along its negatives, its disadvantages. Whatever you choose, you will be a רשע למעלה. We must, if we are responsible leaders, look for the least harmful, the least unprincipled alternative, even if it has jagged ends and is less than perfect.

Allow me to share with you my feelings on the matter as it now stands.

First, let me say that I am dismayed that leaders, on both sides, have allowed this matter to get out of hand when, in purely practical terms, it involves but a handful of people per year--maybe 6 or 8 non-halakhically converted Gentiles who annually seek to make Aliyah. The battle is over symbols, and symbols are important. For us, the amended Law of Return, containing the words גיור כהלכה, symbolizes the supremacy of Halakha and the invalidity of any other form of conversion. For the non-Orthodox this very amendment and these very words symbolize Israel's denial of their participation as full partners in Jewish life and the enterprise of Israel, and represent an Orthodox effort to sow divisiveness amongst Jews. So now we face a bitterly divided Jewish world and

growing enmity and hatred not over substance but over symbols. And I submit that no symbols are worth hurting the cause of Torah or the cause of Israel so grievously!

Second, I take exception to the position of most Orthodox parties in Israel who are pursuing the amendment with relentless determination. I agree with Rabbi Shach, the Rosh Yeshiva of Ponovezh, that the whole campaign is an exercise in futility. Even if we should win and force the Knesset by our political leverage to adopt the amendment, it will be challenged by the others, especially the Conservatives, who will probably persuade the Supreme Court that their conversions too are halakhic. In that case, we shall have lost on the "Who is a Jew" question and gained the hatred of all other Jews. This will be not a Pyrrhic victory, but--if there is such a thing--a Pyrrhic defeat...

Moreover, important as the principle of *גיור לפי ההלכה* is, we have failed to distinguish between means and ends. An ideal may be sacred, but the means of implementation are not necessarily sacrosanct--and indeed may be quite the reverse. There is a vast difference between content and form, between substance and strategy. A secular body such as the Knesset is not the right forum to determine halakhic issues, and politics is not necessarily the most effective way to win the hearts and minds of the Jewish people. Threats and coalitions and coercion and legislation do not advance the program of Torah Judaism, which teaches (in the Sifre) that one of the meanings of *שיחא שם שמים מתאהב על ידך* is *ואהבת את ה' אלקיך*, that to love God means to make His Name beloved by others; that *דרכיה דרכי נועם* which, in contemporary American political parlance, means that people of Torah must appear and be "gentler and kinder" than others; that we must be sensitive to others who, though they now are estranged from us, may one day wish to come closer and therefore should not be permanently alienated. This is Torah doctrine, not just some "goody-goody" preachment. For to cause widespread disaffection and rejection of Torah is a case of *חילול השם*,

and where such desecration of the divine Name takes place, the Mishnah taught us, אין חילקין כבוד לרב, we do not bow to anyone's authority.

Third, I cannot let this occasion pass without expressing my consternation at the disproportionate reaction of the Reform and Conservative communities, at the fiercely extravagant and irresponsibly extreme onslaught against Orthodoxy as a result of this perceived hurt. The mobilization of American legislators, some of them non-Jewish Senators and Representatives, to interfere in an internal Israeli and Jewish issue, is something which, if we Orthodox did it, would be considered inexcusable. When religious parties, elected in a democratic if awkward manner, negotiate for their constituencies' needs and demands, that is sneeringly termed "balckmail" and occasions near anti-Semitic cartoons in the Israeli press. But what is sauce for the goose is apparently not sauce for the gander; how lightly do certain leaders of the organized American Jewish community threaten the withholding of funds from Israel (actually the needy people and causes, not the government of Israel) and, far worse, the refusal to help Israel politically in its ongoing dealings with the American government and public opinion. My heart breaks when I say that this is more than blackmail; it is an act of betrayal, nothing less. It is, tragically, a highly disturbing insight into the loyalty to the State of Israel by so much of American Jewry and American Jewish leadership if, because of this alleged insult to their rabbis, they are prepared to abandon the Jewish State. What a sad commentary on their priorities.

In 1949, the late Gov. Herbert Lehman was addressing a large gathering of Jews at a dinner for Israel Bonds or UJA, I do not recall which. At that time, many American Jews were deeply distressed at Israel being governed by a Socialist party. Even then, many semi-assimilated American Jews--the very same types who are now enamored of Labor--considered putting a distance between themselves and Israel because of

this. Gov. Lehman acknowledged that he too did not prefer a Socialist regime. He then stepped back from the podium and, dramatically, asked, "But ladies and gentlemen, for Heaven's sake, is this a reason for abandoning the Jewish state and the Jewish people?" That question is as relevant and as poignant now as it was then--and even more so.

At a time when a new administration is taking over the reins of government in the U.S., Israel's great and powerful ally; when the threat of the Palestinian intafada hangs over the heads of all Israelis; when tempers flare and positions harden and the vision of Jewish unity seems more distant than ever--at a time of this sort we must be prepared for greater risks, for redoubled efforts at talking to each other civilly, for greater restraint, and for more mutual understanding.

When Jacob, as we read yesterday, prepared for his historic confrontation with his brother Esau, we are told ויירא יעקב Esau, we are told ויירא יעקב מאוד, Jacob was very frightened and he was distressed, and he divided his people into two groups.

What so scared him that the Torah uses two synonyms--ויירא and ויצר--to describe his fright? Hasidim answer: he feared, first, the enmity of Esau, ויירא יעקב מאוד, and so he knew that he had to divide his clan so that at least some of them could survive Esau's attack. Yet ויצר לו, he remained deeply troubled by the very strategy of ויחץ את העם because he knew that no matter what the danger from without, divisions within his own family constituted a mortal danger in its own right! As the archetype of a great and responsible Jewish leader, Jacob was terrified at the thought of divisiveness and disunity in his own ranks. He knew that whatever he did, his decision would be morally imperfect--רשע למעלה, that he had no choice but to select the lesser of two evils: אשר נשיא יחטא יחטא. But the thought of a split in the Jewish polity, of profound disunity--that terrorized him.

All Jews, of all groups, must acknowledge that fright and that terror and do whatever we can to avoid further divisions, more hate, greater enmity in the House of Israel.

We must learn from Jacob and be ready to do all to avoid ייחץ וקעס --even if it means that we do not achieve our entire ideological agenda, that we are רשע למעלה, not quite perfect when measured by heavenly standards.

I make no facile assumptions that "cooling it" now will solve any ultimate problems. It will not. The problem of halakhically illicit conversions in Israel will remain, but it is at present a manageable one from a practical point of view. The times are too tense to press the issue now. And there are even greater, more sinister problems that we somehow are ignoring at our own peril, such as the problem of halakhically illicit remarriage by divorced persons and the consequent question of illegitimacy, a problem that cannot be solved by reconversion according to Halakha. We shall have to exercise great heroism to solve that thorniest of all issues.

But I reiterate my main thesis: leadership requires that we risk imperfect decisions. Otherwise, we have no right to be פרנס על הציבור מלמטה, to claim the mantle of leadership in the real, terrestrial world in which we live and in which alone the destiny of our people will be forged.

I know that this is a difficult and frightening task. But leadership is impossible without knowing and experiencing such fear--and then overcoming it. I plead with you to be strong, and not to submit to one of the great sins of our age --the violation of the mitzvah לא תגורו מפני איש, "you shall fear no man."

This is no time for hot heads and cold hearts and torn souls. This is precisely the right time for genuine Jewish leaders to reassert cool heads and warm hearts and souls that strive for both wholeness and holiness.

עושה שלום במרומיו הוא יעשה שלום עלינו ועל כל ישראל

May He who creates and prefers peace up Above, even if it means being a רשע למעלה, less than a saint in Heaven, bless us and all Israel with peace as we who are על הציבור bend every effort to achieve it here on earth. ואמרו אמן.