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151 West 86th Street  
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April 18, 1988

President Norman Lamm  
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Dear Norman:

I am writing in response to your request of April 1, 1988 for comments about "Centrist Orthodoxy: Agenda and Vision, Self-Definition, and Self-Evaluation" which you plan to publish in booklet form.

I read the piece and the earlier press accounts with great interest. What you are articulating is of great importance. "Sane" or "moderate" Orthodoxy has been silent for too long, leaving the impression that it has nothing to say or that it secretly admires anti-modern Orthodoxy but does not have the courage of its convictions. The truth is that we believe moderate Orthodoxy to be the form of Judaism most pleasing to God. I therefore strongly support the enterprise of making clear what we believe.

A booklet setting forth the views of Norman Lamm on this subject would therefore be a good beginning. But it would even be better to get something similar that the RCA and the Union would subscribe to. It then ceases to be one person's opinion and becomes the manifesto of a movement. If this is not possible, then one person's opinion is far better than nothing, especially when that person is the President of Yeshiva University.

I have dealt with many of the issues you raise in your paper in The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election (Seabury, 1983) and elsewhere. I will try to make some points briefly but I am sure you will understand that most of them deserve far greater elaboration.

On the whole, I agree with the basic thrust of your paper. My specific comments should be read in that context.

Pp. 1-2

The term "Centrist Orthodoxy" is not without problems. As you say, the implication of the term is that there is an Orthodoxy to the right of the center and one to the left. But you say almost nothing about this left-wing Orthodoxy except that it "consists of a few rabbis, professors, and intellectuals." (p. 2) If centrist Orthodoxy is indeed centrist, then it must be .pn contrasted with what is to the left of it as much as it is contrasted -- in detail -- with what is to the right of it. If this cannot be done, then the reason might be that there is nothing to the left of

centrist Orthodoxy and then the use of the term "centrist" is disingenuous: designed to avoid use of the term "left-wing" which no one wants to be these days. Similarly, I am not convinced by the reason you give for rejecting "modern Orthodox."

While it is true that some modern Orthodox might "consider their modernity a badge of honor," (p. 2) it is also true that you may be avoiding the term "modern" because, together with the right, you consider "modern" a term of dishonor. On balance, I would stick with the term "modern Orthodox" because there cannot be a centrist Orthodoxy without distinguishing it clearly from left-wing Orthodoxy and that, I take it, you are not prepared to do.

P. 3

You rightly distinguish Orthodox from non-Orthodox on the basis of their attitudes to halachah. But in so doing, you give the impression that halachah is the essence of Judaism. Here I disagree. I believe halachah to be a necessary element of Judaism but not its essence. The Jewish people is a fully formed covenantal partner of God by the time it arrives at Sinai. Were halachah the essence of Judaism, then those who are not committed to it would indeed be outside of the covenant. They are inside the covenant in a sinning mode because they remain a part of the Jewish people that stands in relation with God, which relation is the essence of Judaism.

I have my reservations about the lighthouse story. It is too sermonic and cute, the kind of thing we'd expect to find in the Reader's Digest. It does not belong in a serious piece of work.

P. 9

I find the distinction between validity and legitimacy tortured. I think that all that needs to be said is that while we disagree with non-Orthodox interpretations of Judaism, we love and respect all Jews. We are all sinners and it is for God to judge each individual.

I am personally rather hard-line on the conversion issue. I can deal with all kinds of Jews but I cannot deal with non-Jews whom I am expected to accept as Jews. I think you should emphasize the conversion issue as the greatest danger to our survival as one people.

P. 12

In the bible, the heart is the place of thought ("he said in his heart"). I would therefore be careful in distinguishing heart from mind in the biblical context.

P.13

The word, I believe, is "simplicism" rather than "simplism."

I like your point that human beings can only glimpse part of the truth, never all of it and that we can learn even from those who are mostly wrong. This point deserves more emphasis.

P. 14

The statement "To be tolerant of intolerance is an error" contradicts Mark Twain's opinion on the previous page about "Moderation in all things -- except moderation." If we must not be moderate about moderation, then, as you say, we must be extreme in our pursuit of moderation. But if we must be extreme in our pursuit of moderation, then we must be tolerant of intolerance as well. In any case, this needs a little work.

P. 16

If "we have raised our children to strive too much for worldly goods and business success and high-paying professional jobs," then this fact cannot be treated in isolation from the Torah U-madda ideology. I would face up squarely to the fact that this is a danger that follows from that ideology, even if it is not a necessary consequence.

Finally -- and this is out of the context of specific page references -- I would strive for a more spiritual tone to the piece. At the center of our Judaism is God, our love of him and his love of us. In much of Orthodox discourse, God recedes into the background. You complain that the Torah learning of the scholars of centrist or modern Orthodoxy is not sufficiently recognized. But even more important than Torah scholars are holy persons and it is these that we lack in modern Orthodoxy. To recognize that we lack them may make us, in time, worthy of having them among us.

Cordially,



Michael Wyschogrod