

ישיבת רבנו יצחק אלחנן

RABBI ISAAC ELCHANAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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ב"ה כ"ג חשוון תשס"ד
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Dear Rabbi Ehrentreu שליט"א:

With all due respect to you – and I have a great deal of admiration for you – I have a different שיטה with regard to the issues of “recognition” and, hence, Limmud.

In my 52 years of public life – 25 in the pulpit and 27 at Yeshiva as President and now Chancellor and Rosh Hayeshiva—I have struggled with this theme and have listened intently and carefully to the point of view you now expound and to which, indeed, I myself first subscribed. However, I now firmly believe that it is a nostrum that has not in the least improved the religious situation of American Jewry. We too, by some legerdemain and statistical *pilpul*, acted as if Orthodoxy was the religion of choice by the majority of American Jewry, and we therefore refused to recognize the other groups which we considered not only heretical but minority sects, splinter and deviant groups that have nothing to say and nothing to contribute to ישראל. We have gained nothing from this approach other than a growing estrangement from the masses of Jews who do not know us and now do not *want* to know us—and a long, fruitless, and damaging polemic within Orthodox circles.

I wish to make it clear. I do not regard myself as a pluralist, if by that term it is meant that all “denominations” are equally valid. That is nothing but a disguised relativism that can only result in a nihilistic chaos. But I do not believe that we gain anything for ישראל כלל by insulating ourselves from them. As רבנים our mission is תורה to *all* Israel, most especially to those who have wandered off the דרך הישר. You know as well as or better than I do the Netziv’s interpretation of תורה ומקרבן לברית. If we speak only to our own group, only to other Orthodox Jews, we are essentially talking to

ourselves, and while it is good to reinforce our own people in their אמונה, this must not be our total preoccupation.

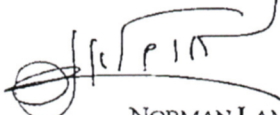
You say that Limmud turned down the offer of a special session for Orthodox spokesmen. That would be an excellent solution, except for the fact that we thereby alienate large numbers of unaffiliated Jews who are searching for roots in Torah, but resent what they consider religious arrogance and contempt for all but our own group. You and I know that for the most part this is not a case of arrogance (although we must admit to a certain degree of superciliousness which is reflected in the bruising polemics within Orthodoxy), but these "others" judge us by our appearance and conduct and language, not by what we *really* mean or intend. דברים שבלב אינם דברים.

To my mind, no matter whether or not the leaders of Limmud fly the pluralist flag, we ought not allow thousands of searching Jews to gather to hear about "Judaism," and yet hear nothing from Orthodox spokesmen because we are distressed by the possibility of "recognition." I am willing to risk the insignificant number of people who may be misled to conclude that we are all the same, if I thereby have the opportunity to present to a far larger number what is perhaps their only chance to hear an authentic voice of Torah presented to them בחן וברחמים and without a scintilla of superiority. I do not believe we ought to continue to define ourselves by contrast with Liberal or Progressive or Reform or Conservative – the labels are often interchangeable and fairly meaningless. We have a positive and compelling case to make about תורה מסיני and should train our younger colleagues to דוקא choose to be the speakers at such gatherings so that our message comes across in the most attractive manner, not as bombast or condescension.

My dear and revered colleague, I appreciate your point of view, and the decision of the Beis Din which you head, but I am not bound by it—even as I do not feel bound by decisions of the עדה החרדית or even the Agudah authorities in my country or abroad. Moreover, a decision on a שטוב שאלה carries weight for its constituents, but questions of השקפה are not subject to hierarchical authority and to the finality of פסק. I choose to speak at Limmud because I firmly and deeply believe that my fundamental duty as a Rav is to teach Torah to as many Jews as possible, even if I have to risk the results of "recognition."

I have gone on at some length solely because of my esteem for you and because I owe it to you to explain my approach as best as I can. ויהיו לרצון אמרי פי.

Respectfully,



NORMAN LAMM