

Excerpts of an Addressby Dr. Norman Lammat the Annual Dinner of Amit WomenNew York City, December 4, 1988

(#2)

The "Rambam Award" bestowed upon me by Amit Women leaves me both grateful and humbled. One cannot but feel the weight of one's own intellectual, spiritual, and moral inadequacy when his name is linked to the immortal Rambam or Maimonides. Permit me, therefore, to try to overcome this paralyzing inferiority--at least for a short while--by using this special occasion to suggest the relevance to us of Rambam's teaching, specifically in relation to our present holiday, Hanukkah.

The Rambam, in his great halakhic opus, the Mishneh Torah, codifies the laws of Hanukkah. The very last of these laws is of special interest:

היו לפניו נר ביתו ונר חנוכה או נר ביתו וקידוש היום  
נר ביתו קודם משום שלום בית... גדול השלום שכל התורה  
ניתנה לעשות שלום בעולם שנאמר דרכיה דרכי נועם וכל  
נתיבותיה שלום

Rambam is telling us that if one is exceedingly poor, so that on the Friday night of Hanukkah he must choose between buying a single candle for Shabbat or a candle for Hanukkah, or between buying a Shabbat candle or wine for Kiddush on Shabbat, he must choose the Shabbat candle over all else. This is so, the Rambam decides on the basis of the relevant talmudic text in the second chapter of tractate Shabbat, because the Shabbat candle (unlike the Hanukkah candle whose light may not be used for any illumination or other "profane" purpose) is kindled for the sake of shalom bayit, domestic

peace. Without the Shabbat candles, without light in the home on Shabbat, people would fall, trip, get in each other's way, hit into each other, and tempers would flare. A dark home is a home without joy, without peace, without shalom bayit. Even though today we enjoy the kind of affluence which ensures illumination even without the Shabbat candles, their symbolism remains as powerful and relevant as ever. The important point in this halakhah is that the Sabbath candle takes precedence over Kiddush, and over the Hanukkah candle as well. Rambam concludes by quoting a passage from another talmudic source averring that shalom, peace, is great, so great that all of Torah was given in order to bring peace into the world, as Solomon wrote, "[The Torah's] ways are the ways of pleasantness and all its paths are the paths of peace" (Prov. 3:17). Hence, the precedence the Talmud accords to shalom bayit has biblical warrant.

Now, this is quite remarkable. It is Rambam's style to conclude each section of halakhot with a literary-legal flourish, a climactic halakhah epitomizing and enhancing all that preceded it. One would expect, therefore, that the last halakhah in the Laws of Hanukkah would confirm the importance of Hanukkah and the need to accord it all honor. Yet, this is not the case here. On the contrary, the apex of the Laws of Hanukkah in the Code of Rambam tells us that Hanukkah, significant as it is, must yield to shalom bayit, because peace is the very purpose of Torah and therefore must receive priority over all else--over Hanukkah, even over Kiddush which is a biblical commandment. The beauty of Hanukkah, as the formulation by Rambam indicates, is that it transcends itself, it points to something beyond and above itself-- to shalom, especially shalom bayit, peace of and in the family.

Can there be anything more relevant than that sublime lesson --especially in this hectic, tumultuous period of internal strife in the House of Israel? Indeed, it is when shalom bayit is most lacking and hostility most rampant that this

teaching of Rambam is most necessary, most vital, most indispensable.

All of us know that Jewish disunity is a plague that has been with us from the very beginning. Rarely have we seen complete harmony prevail in our ranks. But never before, at least not in my lifetime, have I experienced such widespread animosity and open hatred in the world Jewish community.

I am convinced that we are in the grips of a mass neurosis. How else but in psychologically clinical terms can one describe a situation in which a battle over symbols reaches such a feverish pitch that it overwhelms all else, and that it seems that we have all taken leave of our senses?

On the one side, a perfectly legitimate argument--unarguable from a halakhic point of view--is pressed with obsessive passion, beyond all reason, insisting that the halakhic definition of Jewishness must be inserted in the secular Israeli Law of Return by means of an amendment to that Law to be passed by the Knesset. Years ago, when Ben Gurion raised the issue of "Who Is a Jew," I wrote an article strongly advocating the Orthodox view, i.e., the halakhic definition. But I do not believe that every good idea is worth sacrificing every other good idea, certainly your life and welfare--and that of countless others--for it. Not every mitzvah requires martyrdom. At a time when a new administration is taking over the reins of government in the United States; when the Israeli government is paralyzed; when the Intifada threatens the safety and security of the State of Israel; when the people must decide the issue of the territories and evaluate new moves on the Arab side--at a time of this sort the insistence upon diverting our attention from all these life-and-death concerns to deal with a purely symbolic issue (the half dozen or so Gentiles whose conversion was halakhically invalid and seek to enter Israel as Olim) is simply not rational; it is an obsession, and we can ill afford irrationality to guide our public policy.

On the other side, the situation is even more frightening. A mere obsession is as nothing compared to the mass hysteria that has been released over the self-same symbolic issue. I do not believe that so many prominent Jewish "leaders" manned the ramparts on behalf of any other Jewish cause, or travelled to Israel in such large numbers, or expended so much raw passion, either in 1948 or 1967 or 1973, as they have in the Great Imbroglia of 1988. Threats have abounded to withhold financial assistance from Israel, to desist from offering political support for the State, to punish the U.J.A. and Bonds for Israel. Even if these will have been proven to be empty threats, or expressions of nervous exaggeration, they are a terrible revelation, almost an apocalyptic disclosure of how truly tenuous is the connection to Israel of so much of American Jewish leadership. And all this tumult over what?--over the perceived snub to American non-Orthodox rabbis. Granted that such a snub or delegitimation results from the proposed amendment to the Law of Return, is the hurt so great and the damage so terrible that it is worth abandoning Israel for the sake of 6 or 10 or 15 potential olim or the dignity of the non-Orthodox rabbinate--usually by people who attend their Temple services three times a year, if that often? This is hysteria, plain and simple, and the mass reaction which leadership has described as "visceral" is certainly not cerebral; it means that we have begun to think with our bellies and glands, not with our heads and brains.

So we are faced with two unreasonable sides, each demanding unconditional surrender. Worse, and far more frightening, is the revolting presence of a Jewish anti-Semitic element that has revealed itself in the anti-Orthodox rhetorical excesses. I may be paranoid but, as has often been said, paranoid people are sometimes persecuted. This self-hatred has such dreadful implications that I prefer that we sweep it under the communal carpet for as long as we can.

Clearly, and most unfortunately, there is no time like the present to reaffirm Rambam's teaching of the lesson of Hanukkah, namely, that of the overriding importance of shalom bayit. Not only is shalom bayit a greater precept than that of Hanukkah, but the achievement of the former is unquestionably a greater miracle than the latter...

It should be added that Rambam practiced what he preached. He was a "hard liner" theoretically. Probably more so than most other Rishonim (medieval halakhic authorities), he was relentlessly systematic in excluding heretics of all kinds from the fraternity of Israel. Yet, in practice, a different kind of Rambam appears--one gentler, more sensitive, more approachable. Thus, when it came to the thorniest communal problem of his epoch, that of the heretical Karaite sect, Rambam marshalled his prodigious talents as the greatest talmudist since the close of the Talmud itself, and initiated a policy of stilling the polemic and treating the Karaites as lost sheep rather than as wilfull transgressors.

That marvelous combination of the integrity of principle and practical accomodation, that reconciliation of the ideal and the real, that prominence of shalom bayit as a high halakhic desideratum, must be reasserted today with courage and fearless resolve. This vision is one of moderation--not the moderation of compromise, of political accomodation, of seeking the least common denominator, of the adult equivalent of the child's fear of loud noises--but a moderation that issues from the holiest of holies of Jewish thought and values, that reflects the most profound teachings of Judaism throughout the ages. Such a moderation is characteristic of that grouping within Orthodox Judaism that is now generally known as Centrist Orthodoxy (as well as Modern Orthodoxy or, in its Israeli form, as Dati Judaism).

Permit me to take this occasion to correct a misapprehension about "Centrism" and to demonstrate that this moderation of

which I speak has already been prefigured by the Rambam more directly and constitutes a major pillar of the Jewish faith.

Critics of Centrism have reacted with dismay to the very name "Centrist Orthodoxy," assuming that our doctrine of moderation requires of us that we find a mid-point between Orthodoxy and Reform or assimilationism and claim that territory as our religious home. Thus, we would effectively be tantamount to abandoning Orthodox Judaism in favor of some new compromise.

Now, that is a foolish and unworthy suspicion. First, that compromise already has a name; depending on how far to the left you set your limits, it is called Conservatism or Reform. Second, it is no compliment to our intelligence to imagine that we advocate walking about the religious terrain with a yard-stick and calipers and a pocket calculator, measuring the exact distance between Neturei Karta and "Humanistic Judaism" in order to locate the exact middle or center. We are not, and do not aspire to be, spiritual statisticians who search out the mean between right and wrong, religious and non-religious, mitzvah and averah, and settle upon that mean as our religious goal. We may be wrong, but I submit that our centrism is not that simple-minded.

Let me back up a bit and, in order to clarify what I mean by Centrism, sketch in briefly some of the background of the "theory of the mean" or center or middle in Rambam's thought. (I shall here be repeating some of what I published in the Fall 1986 issue of Tradition.)

It was the Rambam who established moderation as a principle of Judaism when he elaborated his doctrine of the mean or "the middle way" (ha-derekh ha-benonit or ha-derekh ha-emetzait) as the Judaized version of the Aristotelian Golden Mean in his Mishneh Torah (Hikhot De'ot) as well as in his earlier "Eight Chapters." The mean is, for Rambam, the

right way and the way of the virtuous (ha-derekh ha-yesharah, derekh ha-tovim).

Every disposition or facet of character can be plotted along a line going from one extreme to another. Thus, to take an example from the way we deal with money: one can be niggardly and greedy or, at the other extreme, extravagant and a squanderer. Someplace in the center, in between parsimoniousness and exorbitance, is the intelligent and moderate way of handling money. Another example: concern for one's own well-being. At one end is cowardice, at the other extreme is a foolish boldness that is unnecessarily dangerous, and in middle a moderate, sane form of courage.

Now, this doctrine of the mean, the basis of the theory of moderation, is open to attack on several grounds. First, as I already implied in describing the criticism of Centrism which is based on this Maimonidean teaching, it appears to be highly artificial, a mathematical approach to life and character which should, in truth, be more existential than arithmetic. Second, Rambam here writes of individual character not of national or social policy--of dispositions, not religious outlooks and social values. Let me respond to them in order.

I remember that some thirty or more years ago, my teacher Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik שליט"א addressed a convention of the Rabbinical Council of America in Detroit. The burden of his remarks was that we err in assuming that Rambam is prescribing an arithmetic approach to de'ot--opinions or dispositions. Rather, the Rambam's approach is far more dynamic: he favors the ability to go from one end to the other of the spectrum as necessity requires it, so that in sum and on the average we stay in the center, but not that we stay glued to one mid-point forever.

I recall being enchanted by this interpretation, because I had long been troubled by the flatness of the apparent one-dimensional approach of Rambam, but I could not at that time agree that this explanation by "the Rav" was indeed consonant with the express opinion of Rambam. However, one learns never to dismiss an opinion of the Rav without a great deal of thought, and three decades of such thought have borne him out.

According to the Rambam, in man's natural state, nature and nurture both combine to place him, on each spectrum band of character, someplace off center. We are either too sparing or too spendthrift, too fearsome or too reckless. Nature does not incline us to moderation, because the probability that all the elements that go into our composition will lead us to the exact mid-point of character is almost zero. Rather, moving to the center is an act of deliberate, conscious choice effected by the exercise of intelligence. "Therefore," writes Rambam, "our earliest Sages instructed us that a man ought always to weigh his dispositions and measure them and direct them to the middle way."

The key to character for Rambam is not the mean as such, but this weighing and measuring and directing, this conscious use of intellect rather than living a life of "doing the what comes naturally." In other words, the process of arriving at a determination of one's own life and character is more important than the results. It is the dynamic quality of weighing and assessing and then deciding and choosing that qualifies this activity as "the way of the Lord," for we then imitate Him, as befits His divine Image, in exercising the intellect with which He endowed us.

The mean itself is not absolute; thus, Maimonides records two standard exceptions and describes certain general situations where the mean does not apply. This alone demonstrates that the principle of moderation is not a

mindless application of arithmetic averages to his philosophy of character. In this sense, the Rav is completely correct; the Maimonidean outlook is dynamic, it encourages us to move from point to point as long as we do so with complete awareness of the options (for that is what is meant by the weighing and measuring of the extremes and all points in between) and as long as over the long haul we are expressive of the position of the center, or moderation. Maimonidean centrism is, in this sense, different from the passive Aristotelian theory of the Golden Mean. For Rambam, one must engage all possibilities--both extreme positions and all that comes between them--and out of this dialectic emerges a choice determined by intellect rather than the glands or the bias of one's upbringing and environment alone.

We turn now to the second criticism: how can we apply the Rambam's theory of the middle way to our global questions of Jewish policy when Rambam speaks only of the individual's character training?

It is true that Rambam is speaking primarily of moral dispositions and individual personality, not of political or social conduct. Yet, there is good reason to assume that the broad outlines of his doctrine of moderation apply as well to the social and political and religious spheres. First, there is no *prima facie* reason to assume that because Rambam exemplifies his principle by references to personal or characterological dispositions, that this concept does not apply to collectivities, such as the polis or society or the nation, *mutatis mutandis*. Indeed, there is less justification for mass extremism than for individual imbalance. Second, his own historical record reveals a balanced approach to communal problems which, while often heroic, is not at all extremist. Thus, I mentioned earlier his conciliatory attitude towards the Karaites despite his general strictures about the halakhic status of heretics of all kinds.

Third, Maimonides refers to a specific verse which, upon further investigation, reveals significant insights. He identifies the Middle Way with the "way of the Lord," citing Genesis 18:19--"For I have known [Abraham] to the end that he may command his children and his household after him that they may keep the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice"... The Rambam's Middle Way of moderation is thus not simply a restatement of the ethical views which Aristotle arrived at philosophically; it is a profoundly religious doctrine, identifying the Middle Way as the Divine Way, the "Way of the Lord," leading to the assurance of a just and moral world ("to do righteousness and justice"). It is the essential legacy that one generation must aspire to bequeath to the next: "that he (Abraham) may command his children and his household after him that they may keep the way of the Lord..."

Now consider the context of this verse, which the Rambam sees as the source of the teaching of moderation. It appears just after the very beginning of the story of the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah. Verses 16, 17, and 18, just preceding the passage we have cited, tell of the angels looking upon Sodom as Abraham accompanies them onto their way. "And the Lord said: Shall I hide from Abraham that which I am doing [to Sodom], seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations shall be blessed in him? For I have known him (or, preferably: I love him) to the end that he may command his children and his household after him and they may keep the way of the Lord...." God wants Abraham to exercise his quality of moderation, the Way of the Lord, on the Lord Himself as it were, praying for the Lord to moderate the extreme decree of destruction against Sodom and Gomorrah. And Abraham almost succeeds: What follows is the immortal passage of the Lord informing Abraham of His intention to utterly destroy the two cities of wickedness, and Abraham pleading for their survival if they contain at least ten innocent people.

Surely, the "way of the Lord" refers to more than personal temperance alone; the doctrine of moderation, which the term implies according to the Rambam, is set in the context of Abraham's office of a blessing to all the peoples of the earth, and of his heroic defense of Sodom and Gomorrah - symbols of the very antithesis of all Abraham stands for. A more political or communal example of moderation and temperance, of tolerance and sensitivity, is hard to come by. Yet for Rambam, this is the Way of the Lord. The Way of the Lord speaks, therefore, not only of personal attributes but of the widest and broadest scopes of human endeavor as well.

Centrist Orthodoxy therefore has no apologies to offer in adopting the Maimonidean teaching of the Way of the Lord, the "middle way," for its policy of moderation.

Our times are marked by a painful absence of such moderation. Extremism is rampant, especially in our religious life. Of course, there are reasons--unhappily, they are too often very good reasons--for the new expressions of zealotry. There is so very much in contemporary life that is reprehensible and ugly, that it is hard to fault those who reject all of it with unconcealed and indiscriminate contempt. Moreover, extremism is psychologically more satisfying and intellectually easier to handle. It requires fewer fine distinctions, it imposes no burden of selection and evaluation, and substitutes passion for subtlety. Simplicism and extremism go hand in hand. Yet one must always bear in mind what Murray Nicholas Butler once said: The extremes are more logical and more consistent--but they are absurd.

It is this moral recoil from absurdity and from the penchant for simplistic solutions and intellectual short-cuts, as well as the positive Jewish teaching of moderation as the "way of the Lord," that must inform our Centrist Orthodox public policy on Jewish matters today.

Moderation is, if anything, more "mainstream" than extremism. But in today's environment, true moderation appears as an aberration or, worse, a manifestation of spinelessness, a lack of commitment. And that is precisely what moderation is not and must not be. It is the result neither of guile nor of indifference nor of prudence; it is a matter of sacred principle. It is the expression of an earnest, sober, and intelligent assessment of each situation, bearing in mind the need to consider the realities of any particular situation as well as general abstract theories or principles, the ability and openness to review all options, and the awareness of the complexities of life--the "stubborn and irreducible" facts of existence, as William James called them, which refuse to yield to simplistic or single-minded solutions. Moderation issues from a broad Weltanschauung or world-view rather than from tunnel vision. It requires of us to weigh all options and to assert every bit of objectivity and intellectual equanimity that we can.

The Way of the Lord that was imparted to Abraham at the eve of the great cataclysm of antiquity must remain the guiding principle for Jews of our era who have emerged from an incomparably greater and more evil catastrophe. Moderation, in our times, requires courage and the willingness to risk not only criticism but abuse. If we who identify as Orthodox Jews of the Centrist bent are willing to take on that challenge and that burden, we can yet make a major contribution to Torah Judaism and to the welfare of our people in these unstable times.

If indeed we adopt this teaching of the Rambam as we have explained it, it means that we do not have an automatic "Centrist" response to each and every problem that we chance upon. On the contrary, this approach obligates us to think and reflect and ponder before jumping into the fray. After

deliberation, we may even decide to take what is, relative to the circumstances then prevailing, an extreme position--but it will not be an extremist position! If the process is followed, if the entire spectrum is considered and analyzed, "weighed and measured," the exact decision is less important than the way it was arrived at; then, any selection will be sane, balanced and, even if wrong, at least not in contempt of the most elementary canons of objectivity and intellectual competence. Thus one can be a "radical" in any specific position yet a "moderate" overall--a "centrist" even if not in the exact center.

The restraint, deliberation, and intellectual effort called for in this policy is difficult and demanding, but the prize is by all means worth it! That prize is nothing less than what Rambam, in his Laws of Hanukkah, declared to be the very purpose of Torah: the implanting of shalom bayit or domestic peace in the Jewish household. And such shalom can be attained primarily by light, not heat.

Yet here we Orthodox Jews who believe in moderation and openness and tolerance along with a readiness to offer mesirat nefesh or self-sacrifice for Torah--a fairly good working definition of Centrist Orthodoxy--stub our toes on a problem which just doesn't go away. That is, how do we shield the moderation of the true moderate from the bloodlessness of the merely apathetic? How do we add heat to all the light we strive for--enough heat to inspire as well as light to enlighten? For surely it is a major error to ascribe to this policy of moderation spinelessness or indifference. Centrism is not a "parve" form of Orthodoxy, although too many moderates do give that impression. It is not a case of ideological wimpishness. The deliberation and reflection and thought processes are all part of coming to a decision. Once the decision is made it must be pursued whole-heartedly, never half-heartedly. This whole-heartedness must, it is true, be expressed with civility and sensitivity and

understanding, but always with full commitment and the readiness to suffer for the ideal.

In a word, we need the gift of passion. Our problem is a pedagogical one: how do we educate our people to reflective and yet passionate, civil and yet committed, enlightened and yet spirited. Such education requires example but also reminder: discussion, persuasion, inculcation, reiteration.

I share with you an illustration of such teaching which I heard in the name of the late Rabbi Meir Shapiro, o.b.m., founder and Rosh Yeshiva of the Yeshiva Chakhmei Lublin. Our Father Jacob was frustrated and incensed at his father-in-law Laban for pursuing him in search of the the latter's gods, icons which he accused Jacob of stealing from him. Jacob cries out, "מה פשעי ומה חטאתי כי דלקת אחרי" -- "What is my trespass and what is my sin that thou hast hotly pursued after me?" (Gen. 31: 36). The meaning is obvious: what have I done wrong that you chase after me so? But the Lubliner interprets that much differently: Jacob is not complaining to Laban. Rather, observing Laban's remarkable attachment to his infantile faith--a grown man, wealthy and prestigious, becoming hysterical because he can't find his little artifacts which he considers deities!--Jacob lapses into a self-criticism: How great are my trespass and my sin that I am so relatively blase and torpid and indifferent about my most sacred ideals, when I see this heathen so hot and passionate and devoted to his inane, absurd beliefs!

That is where we sin today, a sin that infects every area of our activity--from our shemirat ha-mitzvot and avodat ha-Shem and our limmud ha-torah, the entire gamut of our peronal religious experience, to our collective posture towards the rest of the Jewish world where we often tremble and quake when we should be proclaiming proudly where we stand and why.

I believe באמונה שלימה, with perfect faith, in the marriage of moderation and passion, of fairness and fervor, of deliberation and dedication, of reasonableness and commitment, of a cool head and a warm heart.

The time has come for us to cease being apologetic and defensive, shy and silent and apprehensive about our שיטה or "way." It is the derekh yesharim, the "way" of those who march "straight" towards the goal of all Israel reaccepting the Torah, which has as its purpose to reestablish shalom in the household of Israel.

Amit women, in taking upon themselves the task of providing educational and technological and agricultural training for religious youngsters in Israel, is performing a קידוש השם; you sanctify the Name of the Lord as you help raise a new generation of young, proud, devoted, self-sufficient Jews and Jewesses in the Holy Land, and thus contribute to both Torah and peace. Your devotion to Israel, to Torah, to the human element in the Jewish equation--all performed with a maximum of love (חסד) and with a minimum of noise and disruption--makes all of us exceedingly proud of you.

On this Festival of Lights, and its teaching of Torah and shalom, may the illumination and enlightenment you bring into the lives of so many young people be the harbinger of the Light of Redemption for us, for al Israel, and for all the world.