

# LE'ELA



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# MODERN ORTHODOXY AT THE BRINK OF A NEW CENTURY

NORMAN LAMM

We are honoured to publish the full text of The Rabbi Isaac Bernstein Memorial Lecture which was delivered on 19 October 1998 at the Finchley Synagogue, London by Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm. Rabbi Lamm, President of Yeshiva University and its affiliated Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) since 1976, is the author of ten volumes, including *Torah Umadda: The encounter of Religious Learning and Worldly Wisdom in the Jewish Tradition* (London: Jason Aronson, 1990). His two most recent books are *The Shema: Spirituality and Law in Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998) and *The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary* (Hoboken: Ktav, 1999). The founding editor of *Tradition*, he has edited some thirty volumes on Jewish themes and has been an ardent advocate of Modern Orthodoxy in the USA and throughout the world.

This is a bitter-sweet occasion for me. It is bitter because it confirms for me psychologically what I already know rationally, namely, that Isaac Bernstein is no longer with us. And it is sweet because the memories are sweet and inspiring.

Rabbi Bernstein was my successor at The Jewish Center in New York City. We became not only colleagues but firm friends. I was enchanted by his sparkling sense of humour, in

awe of his range of knowledge and interests – from Torah, of course, to mathematics and opera – and I simply adored the man's dazzling personality. Because of this combination of talents – scholar, orator, wit, *darshan* – I invited him to teach at our Stern College for Women, where he won a string of loyal students who speak of him with a reverence that survives to this day.

One of his great strengths was his interpretation of the *parashat hashavua*, the biblical portion of the week. In deference to him, I shall present my theme as he would have done it – homiletically – by discoursing on this week's *parashah*, *Noach*, and that of last Shabbat, *Beresheet*.

## Noach

The great floods covered the face of the earth and finally begin to recede. Noach, ensconced in his ark, was not quite sure what to do. He took the raven and sent it out as a test: if the raven does not return, that would be a sign that dry land is available and he can prepare to leave; if it does come back, it means there is no dry land and he must continue to stay in the ark.

R. Velvel Soloveitchik of Brisk *zt'l* asks why this bird was sent out in the first place: even if the bird came back with olive leaves, implying that Noach might leave – or if the bird did not return at all, signifying that land had been sighted and he should prepare to leave the ark – he

would not be permitted to leave because just as he entered the ark on God's command, so he would not be permitted to leave until he was instructed by divine command. R. Velvel offers no answer to his question.

I humbly offer my own solution: Noach was certainly permitted to leave the ark. There was nothing in the message he received about going into the ark that prevented him from going out when the flood was over. He could have, and wanted, to leave his floating menagerie, which is why he sent the bird. But at the last moment he stopped to ponder: 'what kind of world am I going into?' – a world of horrendous corruption (*chamas*, is the Torah's term – a world of violence and moral rot). Not only is the rest of humanity dead of its own crookedness, but the very earth itself has been corrupted. In this kind of world, Noach reflected, should I not rather stay in the ark with animals as the sole accompaniment of my family rather than expose myself and my family to the debris of human society and the lingering stench of this perverted society? Hesitatingly, Noach decided to stay – and it was only then that the divine command came to him: *Tsé min hatevah* 'get out of the ark!' You may not want to leave, you may feel correctly about the rest of the human race, dead or alive, but you dare not stay any longer in the privacy and intimacy of your own ark, averse to what is happening



about you. Out of the ark! There comes a time when you have to swallow your pride, risk your moral convenience, overcome your sense of disgust and repugnance, and go out, face the world, rebuild it.

### Contemporary parallels

Noach's internal dialogue, as we have described it, has great relevance to our time. It speaks to us very directly because Noach's situation was not entirely unlike ours. Noach makes an argument for exclusiveness and for cutting himself off from society. There are groups in our Orthodox Jewish society which openly and unashamedly speak in favour of cutting ourselves off from the rest of the Jewish community. They believe that our society has become irretrievably depraved, and that its moral currency has become irreparably debased; they have, in effect, given up on it. So, they have as little as possible to do with it – or with the Jewish community that reflects society's pitifully depraved values. In a world of falling standards in morality, ethics, and spirituality, there is a good argument to be made for breaking off relations with the rest of the Jewish community and the wider environment of society. It is only fifty years after the Shoah; why should we be interested in the rest of the world? In a situation where the Jewish community is shockingly shrinking, experiencing an unprecedented rate of intermarriage, a case can be made for not mingling with anyone else, for abandoning the communal ship before it goes down and we all drown. The best path – so this argument suggests – is for us to isolate ourselves, increase our population internally, protect our children and keep them immune from the virus of the sick society which surrounds us.

### Responsibility for all Jews

But that is a Noachide policy of defeatism which I cannot accept. It is an abdication of responsibility towards our fellow Jews and fellow

humans. We, too, must listen to the divine command: *Tse min hatevah*, get out of the ark! Yes, society has far lower standards than we have, and you are right to want to protect your children, but we have a responsibility for the rest of mankind. Noach abdicated his responsibility when building the ark because he failed to use the opportunity to preach *teshuvah* to the rest of mankind. Likewise, Orthodox Jews have a responsibility to the rest of the Jewish community. We dare not close our eyes, saying *vaani et nafshi hitsalti*, I have saved myself, my own spiritual integrity, and that is all that counts. I want to secure myself and my family and I don't really care what happens to anyone else.



*Chadesh yamenu kekodem*

We cannot turn our backs on the world and especially not on the Jewish world. We have to trust the divine promise that we are an eternal people and that those who seem to be far away will be brought close. We are responsible for them, and no matter what we may think of them, our duty is to be aware sympathetically of their existence, to care for them, to make sure that we bring whatever benign influence we have on those less committed to Torah. In short, we are summoned to love them as brothers and sisters, to love them if not for their own sakes, at least for the sake of our mutual parents and ancestors. 'Have

we not all One Father? Has not One God created us?'<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, beyond the practical effects of having an influence on the rest of the community, and on its own merits, one must not rush to judge others too harshly. People are complex; some people are strong in one area, weak in another. None of us is perfect, and none is totally beyond redemption.

Let us return briefly to Noach and his ark. When he left the ark, God promised Noach that He would never again destroy the entire human race. He gave mankind a symbol of that promise – more than a promise – a *covenant*: the rainbow.

I have set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be a token of a covenant between Me and the earth And it shall come to pass, when I bring clouds over the earth, and the rainbow is seen in the cloud, that I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh<sup>2</sup>

A passage in the Talmud<sup>3</sup> tells of the prophet Eliyyahu – who in talmudic literature often makes his appearance in mystical visions centuries after he lived – announcing: 'make place for R. Yehoshua ben Levi!' In response, someone was appointed to find R. Yehoshua ben Levi and accord him this honour. The emissary happened to meet R. Shimon ben Yochai, whom he did not recognize, and asked him if he was R. Yehoshua ben Levi. For reasons unimportant for our theme, R. Shimon ben Yochai said that he was. The emissary asked: 'Have you ever seen a rainbow?' R. Shimon said yes, he had. In that case, replied the emissary, you are *not* R. Yehoshua ben Levi!

This anonymous emissary was right, but how did he know to carry out this test? And why did he conclude that the man who admitted to having seen a rainbow could not possibly be R. Yehoshua ben Levi? This perplexing talmudic tale demands further explanation.



### A spectrum of opinions

My late, revered teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt'l, explained this passage as follows: A rainbow is a spectrum, one colour fades into the next and that shades into the next and so on; there is no clear line dividing one from the other. The rainbow is thus a symbol of variability, specifically of the human propensity for diversity and complexity, one attribute flowing into another and blending with it. It is not a black-and-white world; it is a world of greys and shades of colours which constitute the whole spectrum. A human being cannot be identified with only one colour; no-one is that simple, and anyone who tries to define another human being as representing one solitary hue misrepresents him, because each of us is very, very complicated. If we have a rainbow in our hearts—that is, if we act in the knowledge that other people are polychromatic and complicated, that each of us is, therefore, unique, deserving of our compassion and our respect – we do not need a rainbow in the clouds. A rainbow appears in the clouds only when there is no rainbow in the innermost part of one's very being. Thus the emissary's response makes sense: if you were R. Yehoshua ben Levi you would have had an internal rainbow—because that is the kind of man I have heard he is; he needed no rainbow in the clouds because he had one in his heart. If you saw a rainbow, you cannot possibly be R. Yehoshua ben Levi.

It is vitally important for the contemporary Orthodox Jewish community to acknowledge this principle of variation or gradations. Most people are neither a *tsaddik gamur* nor a *rasha gamur*. Rather, these complicated organisms called 'human beings' are maddeningly complex and deserving of our respect even if we are critical of and disagree with them.

Sadly, this 'Rainbow Principle' is not often observed in practice. To be judgmental of others is perfectly legitimate; it makes use of our God-given faculty of intelligence and

critical evaluation. But when we assume that the other is monochromatic, when we define the other as if he or she possesses no other colour, opinion or characteristic, we demonize that person. I stress here that it is acceptable to judge others according to our own values, but it is unacceptable to attribute to them the worst of motives and to assume that because we disagree in one area they are irreparable in all areas.

Of course, we must not be seduced by the popularity of 'pluralism' – a term which is widely used and rarely analyzed for its true meaning. In its usual context nowadays, 'pluralism' is often a disguise for relativism – that is that all values are relative to each other – and that all that you affirm or believe is neither truly right nor wrong, because such matters are determined not by any absolute standards but are relative to the norms or *mores* of your society. Relativism reduces religious principles to the level of taste, of chocolate versus vanilla. So, if you come from a society which has loose morals, you cannot be blamed for any acts which, in a more disciplined society, are considered transgressions. Hence, if someone comes from an African tribal society which sacrifices children, that is what is expected of you in that society, so that even if you perform that brutal act, it is understandable – and forgivable. That kind of relativism can be terribly dangerous and for that reason I am wary of the term 'pluralism'.

We find a great deal of such relativism in contemporary life, and it leads to the inevitable conclusion that there are no real, immutable standards. But when there are no absolutes, there is no God, – and no humanity – nothing is worthy of our sacrifice; and if there is nothing worthy of our sacrifice, there is nothing worth living for – other than the simple-minded hedonism, the belief that we are here in this world to satisfy our desire for food and indulge our erotic instincts.

Our own Jewish approach is totally different: *Mosheh emet v'torato emet* [Mosheh is true and his Torah is true]. There is such a thing as truth.

### Reconciling absolute and variation

How, then, do we reconcile the idea of *emet* – truth, absolutes – with variations of *emet*, reflecting the variations of the *keshet*? On the one hand, if you believe that human beings are infinitely varied and complex, there is no way that you can assert that any one idea is absolute – there is no *emet*. On the other hand, if you believe in *emet*, there is no place for a variety of different opinions, attributes, characteristics and personalities.

The way I have posed the problem is the intellectual's way of imposing his predilection for clear and abstract analysis on the stubborn facts of real life – and distorting them in the process. We have to learn to make these ideas and ideals reconcilable, and so, more conforming to our experience. To the best of our ability, we have to live with both *emet* and *keshet*. One may modify the other but both are necessary to have a balanced, mature view of the world and of Jewishness. We must modify our approach to *emet* so that there is a maximum of *shalom* in the world – and refrain from overstating the virtues of variation so that it overwhelms the basic structure of *emet*. It is indeed burdensome to undertake these evaluations and make such fine distinctions, but that is why God gave us brains and endowed us with both intellect and courage to make distinctions.

### Let Us make man in Our image

The Sages relate that when God decided to create the world, He consulted the ministering angels ('Let Us make a man in Our image...'), who split into two groups of opinion on the advisability of creating Man. *Emet* (depicted as one of the angels) said *al yibare*, Man should not be created, because he is



full of falsehood. *Tsedek* [Justice] said: *yibaré*, Man should be created because he has not yet done anything [wrong]; Man must be given a chance. *Shalom* opposed the creation of Man because he is always fighting and contentious. *Chesed* (love, kindness) supported Man's creation, because he is charitable and generous. The angels were thus equally divided: *Tsedek* and *Chesed* in favour, while *Emet* and *Shalom* were against Man's creation. God broke the tie: He threw the *Emet* angel to the ground, and so the heavenly vote was for the creation of the human race...!

The Rabbis offered two verses to explain this divine decision: one, from Daniyyel 8:12: 'You cast the truth to the earth', and the other from Tehillim 85:12: 'Truth will grow from the earth instead of from heaven.' Thus, there was now a two to one vote in favour of Creation. *Emet* was removed, *Shalom* was outvoted, and *Tsedek* and *Chesed* carried the day. Man was created; the rest, as they say, is history!

One famous explanation of this Midrash is offered by the Kotsker Rebbe: God had to sidetrack *emet*; otherwise, Man could never have been created, because *emet* prevails against any majority. *Emet* is never up for a vote. Truth is absolute and always prevails.

Let me propose another explanation: truth can be confronted in two ways. If truth comes from heaven, that truth is overwhelming and intimidating, and so crushing are the absolute demands it makes upon us that none of us could survive. R. Saadia Gaon in the introduction to his great work *Emunot v'edeot* speaks about *ha'emet hamarah* [the bitter truth]. Truth can indeed be bitter. If you look into a mirror and examine yourself intently and honestly, you are likely to be unhappy; this is true not only of the physical mirror but even more so of the mirror of your soul, your personality and character. The truth that comes from heaven is truly unbearable. Hence, God threw *Emet* into the ground and made it come

up again, *emet me'erets tismach*. Truth must grow from the ground up – step by step, cell by cell, leaf by leaf, root by root, branch by branch. Only then can we learn to absorb and assimilate it. This truth enhances and ennobles all of life, for truth must come organically, slowly, as an evolutionary process, from the earth.

There is yet a third interpretation – in consonance with the one proposed earlier – which comes from a chasidic rebbe who avers that if *emet* is taken in an absolute sense, then *shalom* is defeated. If I believe that what I believe and advocate is *emet* and that your *emet* is not *emet*, society cannot survive. If the insistence upon my truth necessarily precludes your vision of the truth, then I must fight you to the death, which is what causes so much destruction and dissonance in society. To have *shalom* in the world, if Man is to survive, then those with differing points of view must hold on to their *emet*; but none must hold on to their truth to preclude the other's truth. No one has a monopoly on the truth. Although I may feel and even *know* that I am right and you are wrong, I must give you the right to utter your truth. Thus, in the imagery of the Midrash, *emet* was hurled to the ground, because otherwise mankind could never have existed.

Hence, the third lesson is that abstract absolute *emet* must yield to the pragmatic social requirements of *shalom*. Through peace, the Jewish community and the Jewish people as a whole, and all of society, are viable and can survive with dignity. We must allow as much *emet* as possible without suppressing the other party and denying him or her the permission to utter his or her truth.

#### Moderation not extremism

While walking this very thin line between principle and practicality, between peace and truth, we learn that it is important to avoid extremism. When dealing with issues of ultimate conviction and commitment—matters of religion,

spirit, morality, and belief, upon which we base our lives – it is easy to veer to an extreme. Judaism requires moderation; this does not mean a lack of conviction and passion in what you believe, but moderation in your understanding of how society and community operate and what makes life possible.

Rambam, in *Hilkhot Deot*, developed his theory of moderation—which he called the *derekh Hashem*, 'the way of the Lord'. He also refers to it as well as 'the middle road', and it is often referred to as 'the Golden Mean'. In matters of character, it teaches, we must abjure extremes and keep to the path of moderation; which is *derekh Hashem*. What Rambam legislates is not a mathematical middle; to be a moderate means you have to exercise your intellect. *Yehei sham besikhlo*, he writes; one must evaluate and assess one's own personality with one's mind. We are born with certain predispositions but that does not mean that we are locked into that kind of personality; we must create our own character. If you find yourself leaning to one extreme, move towards the other so that you will end up in the middle. This is not a mathematical model, but using intellect and judgment to make yourself into a better kind of human being.

This teaching of moderation is concerned not only with individuals, but with society at large as well. The Torah tells us that when God created the world, He said, at each stage: *ki tov*, [it is good]. When Man was created, the text reads: 'it was very good'.<sup>4</sup>

Our Sages say *tov meod zeh malakh hamavet* <sup>5</sup> Good is good, but very good – that is the Angel of Death! This sounds macabre and strange. Rabbi Yosef Engel, one of the talmudic and mystical giants who lived at the beginning of the twentieth century, comments: *ki kol meodiyyut zeh hamavet* – everything that is 'very' is death'. Any good quality or idea applied as 'very', in extreme fashion, instead of with



moderation from a rational outlook on life – leads to death. We have seen this borne out all too often in our history and, tragically, in our own lifetime. Josephus' description of the Jewish responses to the Roman siege of Jerusalem of the Second Temple bears eloquent testimony to the truth of that statement.

Let me relate an incident which took place at the end 1970s, in New York. A rabbi of a significant synagogue found himself in a dilemma and asked me to introduce him to the late Rav Soloveitchik zt'l. At the meeting, the rabbi poured his heart out to the Rav who was silent while he told his story. When he had finished, the Rav looked at him and said: in this week's *parashah*, *Vayetsei*, we read '*ve Yaakov halakh ledarko vayifge'u vo malakhei Elohim* [Jacob went on his way and he encountered the angels of God] My advice to you is: go on your own, authentic *derekh* unafraid, look neither to the right nor to the left. Do not be intimidated by anyone. Go in the way you believe is right and you will meet the angels of God.'

That perplexed rabbi was Rabbi Isaac Bernstein, of blessed memory. He followed the Rav's advice. And indeed, by abjuring the *meod* of the Angel of Death he met the angels of God...This is a lesson for all of us. When pondering our aspirations and what the Jewish community ought to be doing and what we as individuals should do, the answer is: let us do what is right, not look to the right or to the left; but let us go on our chosen *derekh* and prepare to meet the *malakhei Elohim*.

#### A map for modern orthodoxy

These four lessons emerging from our *parashat hashavua*—responsibility for all Jews, respect for other opinions, striving for communal peace and unity, and pursuing moderation instead of extremism—might well be the map for Modern Orthodoxy. To this I would add *Torah Umadda*, the encounter of Torah with worldly culture; the advocacy of *Medinat Yisrael*; and extending higher Jewish

education to women who desire it. These are the main elements of the Modern Orthodox approach. For the rest, we are at one with all of Orthodoxy in the study of Torah and observance of the mitzvot, and in *kiruv rechokim*, attracting non-observant Jews to Torah.

#### The challenge

Modern Orthodoxy is extremely vital for the health of the entire Jewish people, whether they know it or not. We are in a most difficult situation. In my 48 years in the rabbinate I have never experienced so much and such intense



*Chadesh yamenu kekodem*

'Orthodox-bashing' by the Left. Irrational antagonism has grown because of battles in Israel and America by Reform and Conservative groups in collusion with each other. We, Orthodox Jews, are not blameless: for too long, we have peppered our legitimate disagreements with them with gratuitous insults and personal defamation. They, in turn, have responded by escalating the encounter beyond rhetoric. A number of Orthodox people in communal Jewish life have suffered personally as a result. And most recently American Reform leaders, with Conservative collaboration, have attempted blackmail, threatening Israel that American Jews will withhold their

contributions and Israel stands to lose \$100,000,000. Despite the hyperbole, the very fact of such threats goes far beyond the petty insults of not having their conversions recognized in a country where their impotence is reflected in their numbers. This is a frightening situation for all Jewry. At the same time, the Charedi world has become more Charedi and increasingly looks down on the Modern Orthodox community and tries to intimidate us in ways best not described in public. The abuse is too painful for anyone who cherishes brotherly love amongst Jews.

This is not the way Jews, especially 'frum' Jews, ought to behave. My late father, z'l, often quoted a Yiddish aphorism: 'A Jew doesn't have to be *frum* [pious]. A priest has to be pious. A Jew has to be *ehrich* [honorable]'. The mission of a devout Jew is to be good and pleasant both to God and man. What we are seeing is a breakdown of that sacred mission in the course of a *Kulturkampf* which is ugly and unprecedented since the terrible days preceding the destruction of the Second Commonwealth. We are being torn apart politically, culturally, ethnically, and religiously.

Modern Orthodoxy shares with the Charedi world a total commitment to Halakhah, and melds this with a critical openness to the rest of the world. We are the only ones who can bridge the abyss between both sides of the Jewish world. To do this, we must not answer insults with other insults, but keep our lines open to all sides for as long as we can. We have the possibility of keeping our people together during this terrible transitional period of fragmentation and disintegration.

To succeed, we must remain true to our principles and not be intimidated. Former Prime Minister Shimon Peres tells of the time he was a junior aide to Ben Gurion. The 'Old Man' said to him; 'I have never met Shemuel Yosef Agnon (the Nobel laureate author). Invite



Agnon to visit me in Sede Boker'. Peres duly arranged the visit, and upon their return Peres asked Agnon what he thought of Ben Gurion. He replied: 'Ben Gurion is not afraid of the *goyim*—and he is not even afraid of the Jews.' The same applies to us. Let us not be intimidated. What we stand for is real and authentic. This is the way Judaism was meant to be lived—in the fullness of life, not only in a ghetto. At Sinai we were instructed to be *goy kadosh umamlekhet kohanim* [a holy nation and a kingdom of priests]. We were not commanded to be (in the words of the late Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits) the *Neturei Karta* of the nations. We are a Jewish nation, not a sect or a cult. This is what Yeshiva University represents and what the late Rav Bernstein z'l represented. And that is the sacred mission to which we are summoned this day.

When the Torah is returned to the ark, we chant *chadesh yamenu kekedem*, renew our days as of old'. In this verse from *Eikhah*, Yirmeyah witnesses the destruction of the First Temple. The Midrash comments<sup>6</sup> that the verse refers to the time God expelled Adam and Chavvah from *Gan Eden* [the Garden of Eden] and He placed them *mikedem legan eden*, east of Eden. Remarkable! Are we really to pine for the days *after* we were driven out of Paradise?

The Midrash is teaching us

something precious and very relevant. This prayer is not one of nostalgia; the word *kedem* has two meanings: one refers to time and the other to space. *Kedem* as time means the 'past'; as space it means 'east'. Yirmeyah means the space *kedem*—the expulsion of Adam and Chavvah when they were placed east of Eden. Thus, there are two types of *Gan Eden*. One is that which God, parents, society gives you at birth; it is all prepared.. Adam did not have to work very hard in Paradise. But that which is given to you for nothing is worth little. *Gan Eden* for which you do not work will not last. The real beginning of human history comes when Adam and Chavvah are expelled from *Gan Eden*, exiled to the east of Eden and told to build their own *Gan Eden*! We should not be satisfied with a *Gan Eden* bequeathed to us by parents or society or the community. Every generation has to build its own *Gan Eden*.

I appeal to the younger people who are here: *chadesh yamenu kekedem*, renew your coming days *kekedem* in the way the Midrash interprets it—*mikedem legan eden*. Build your own *Gan Eden*. Strive for a community in which there is Torah and *Yirat Shamayim* and *kavod* and *derekh erets*, one in which you can make Torah and mitsvot prevail without embarrassment and without becoming extremist, unthinking or

unfeeling. Put your own imprint on it, and it will bring the ultimate redemption closer.

I conclude with the opening words of the prophet Chaggai (1:2): 'Thus speaks the Lord of Hosts, saying: "This people [Israel] say that the time has not yet come that the house of the Lord should be built... Is this a time for you yourselves to dwell in your houses while this house [the Temple] lies waste?"

Now is the time for us to build the *Beit Yisrael*, the House of Israel, one in which God will dwell. Our people is being pulled apart, facing pressures not seen before: *et livnot beit Yisrael*, this is the time, now, for each and every one of us to make our individual and collective contributions to the renaissance of Yiddishkeit and thus bring about a world of communal and international peace, health both physical and spiritual, and happiness for all God's creatures. Then the House of God will rise in Jerusalem forever.

#### Notes

- 1 Malakhi 2:10
- 2 Bereshit 9:12-13
- 3 Ketubbot 77b
- 4 Bereshit 1:31
- 5 Bereshit Rabbah 9
- 6 Eikhah Rabbah 5