

Maalot Dafna 47/24
Jerusalem, Israel 97356
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Rabbi Norman Lamm, President
Yeshiva University

Dear Rabbi Lamm,

I am an alumna of YUHSGM and TIW, now a proud Jerusalem housewife. I believe that I owe my presence here and much more to YU. I am also a great and longstanding admirer of your written and spoken words, and I thus feel obligated to comment on your address "Radical Moderation" - a copy of which just arrived in my mail.

The glorification of moderation and abhorrence of extremes are appropriate for Americans Butler and Twain. Not being heirs to the word of G-d, they are confronted in this world with many possible truths. It is reasonable for them to advocate a middle course.

Our position, epitomized for us just now in פְּרִשְׁת נְצוּלִים, is altogether different. For us, the course to follow was laid out clearly, visibly: "וְחַיֵּינוּ" says the verse. (30,15) "...life, and good; death and evil." Choose.

Surely it was not the intention of your address to recommend that we walk a middle path between these two choices. Yet, that is what your words suggest. My education - mostly in YU - taught me an approach more like this: Where a policy for our people in our Land is an application of Torah, it should be supported - wholeheartedly. Otherwise, a course which leads with maximum efficiency to the Torah view should be pursued. Always, our behavior should be an expression of consummate אהבת ישראל. Our goal should be unqualified: perfection, "וְנִמְלֵא אֶת הָאָרֶץ דְּעָה אֶת ה'שֵׁם".

If the words I use are ~~are~~ synonymous with "extreme" and if this is a dirty word, that does not mitigate our obligation. Not the מִדְּבָרִים nor any other Torah source I learned gives a basis for the extension of the middle-way idea to areas outside character traits. Quite the contrary. I strongly suspect that the actions of פְּנִיחָס and the command which gave שֹׂאֵל הַמֶּלֶךְ such a hard time would be dubbed "destructive extremes". Nevertheless, this was the will of G-d at the time. In the absence of prophecy, we must use alternative methods of determining His will today. But we must be unrelenting in the search, and uncompromising in the fulfillment.

If this is a semantic problem, it's a sad one. We should not allow ourselves to be tripped up like that, lest we lead others to extol mediocrity or compromise as the YU way. I am enclosing an article which recently appeared in COUNTERPOINT. It seems to me to highlight the area to which YU alumni should be devoting their efforts. I can only imagine how very many demands there are on your reading time. But I pray that you will find the time anyway, in this season, to consider this perspective and see if, perhaps, the idea you outlined so articulately, needs some reexamination after all.

בברכת כתיבה וחתימה טובה

Sincerely yours,

S. Slata

STATUS WHAT?

Causeless hatred. That's what they're calling it. But nothing is without a cause. What then is the cause of the causeless hatred? Are these just words? Or are words, perhaps, the root of the problem?

A story was told to me recently by a family from the midwestern U.S. Setting aside its personal elements, I found it allegorical. I have played with its elements in my mind. I ask others what they think about its hypothetical development. Somehow, it seems to shed some light on the situation in today's Eretz Yisrael, clarifying concepts which have been lost under a mountain of words.

The story goes as follows: One day a few years back, these people were informed that the area they lived in had been exposed to a toxic leak from a nearby chemical plant. The neighbors got together and invited public health experts to assess the situation.

The experts assured the people that the only possible danger was that of ingesting residues of the poison. Little was known about the long-range effects, and how long the residues would be toxic. They explained to the citizens that their efforts had to be directed at decontaminating the kitchen and anything that might come in contact with food.

A thorough cleaning job could eliminate about 65% of the danger. A professional fumigation team could do much better, up to 88-90%. But the only way to rid one's home of 100% of the toxic deposits was a costly business. Everything that touched food would have to be replaced. Unfortunately, there would be no way to subsidize this work.

I've imagined, for example, that it is my home that has been affected, and that moving away is unthinkable for whatever reason. The first question is: which of the options do I choose for myself? I've asked a number of people, and all seem to be unequivocally clear on this matter. Neither 65% nor even 90% is sufficient where the health of one's family is concerned. Regardless of the cost and inconvenience, the only thing to do is scrap the whole kitchen.

Some of the respondents are people who are noted for their position against extremism of any kind.

"Isn't that extreme?" I ask them. "Well!" the answer is thrown back, somewhat disdainfully, somewhat righteously, "This is a matter of life and death."

There is the first insight. If something is perceived to be of crucial importance, then it is not merely acceptable to go to extremes with it. It is obligatory; it is the only right thing to do.

Without peace, we are lost. But there are two other pillars — emet, truth, and din, justice. On peace alone — peace between true and false, just and unjust ideas — our world totters, and will not stand.

Now back to that troubled neighborhood. I've made my decision. My house will be decontaminated. What about the neighbors' homes? To what extent does the decision of each of them concern me?

Two factors come to mind here. First: neighbors with kitchens still contaminated are a danger to me and my family. Well, I could keep away from them, forbid my children to enter their homes...it could be managed.

But the second point intrudes immediately on this train of thought. Do I care for my neighbors at all? If the health of my family is a matter of supreme and absolute importance to me, it is because I love them. To the extent that I care for others, their welfare will also be vital to me.

Suppose my dearest friend maintains that the danger from the toxin is exaggerated. The cleaning job, which will rid his home of 65% of the risk, the real extent of which is unknown anyway, is sufficient for him. I try to convince him that where life and death are at stake, even a shadow of a doubt should not be left. I offer to lend him the money...I plead. In desperation, I threaten that, if he does not do the job right, neither I nor my family will be able to enter his home. But he remains adamant. What is my response?

Probably, when I realize that he won't listen, I turn away from him and, indeed, protect my own family. Probably, I make some kind of arrangement so that we can continue to be neighbors even though this menace now intrudes. But if I am a loving friend, if my heart really aches for the harm that may come to him, I never make "peace" with it. I never "tolerate" it. Behind whatever "arrangement" I make is the hope that one day my dear neighbor will be more receptive to my urging. If he absolutely won't hear me now, I must bide my time. But I won't stop looking for the opportunity to keep him from harm. Not unless I stop caring about him.

Here is another point that may help us see the truth behind the vocabulary of the modern world. **Tolerance.** Sounds like something good, something friendly and positive. But, where right and wrong are at issue, tolerance is possible only where there is no love. (I am quite tolerant of cannibalism among distant tribes in Africa, for example. Though I disapprove, I don't get actively excited about it. But what if someone I care for decided to join?)

I take the story a step further in

imagination. Time passes, let us say, and I become accustomed to our arrangement. It distances me from my good friend so that I stop looking quite so carefully for openings to urge him to protect himself. He grows older and more concerned for his health, although he won't admit it. In reality, he is waiting for me to raise the subject again. Seeing that I am silent, he senses my lack of interest. Do I no longer care? he may wonder subconsciously. Is good health only my domain? Thus, subtly and unexplainably resentful, he may start encroaching on our long-standing "arrangement", knocking down some barrier that protected me and mine from a harm that he was being subjected to.

Most seem to agree that such a sequence of events is possible, even likely. The reason is that this is not a static world. Things change. People change.

And then I hypothesize that the residents of the affected neighborhood, divided into those who have reacted in a drastic fashion and those who have been more moderate, begin to classify themselves in terms of their reaction. Proud of their concern and devotion to their families, the former begin to call themselves "the Careful." The others — no one knows how it started — are called "the Nocares." The labels stick so well that a whole generation of children define those around them as either Careful or Nocar.

At that point, I can see, the inclination to seek ways to explain the dangers of toxic residues to those who had resisted will be considerably weakened. If we had continued to see one another as neighbors, although this "difference" loomed large between us, an opening might have come for me to show him an article, point out a case, speak from the heart.

But the categorization "Nocar" blocks further view of my former friend, of my brother...we are both trapped in a situation which is created by words and has tragic consequences in reality.

And this insight is the crucial one. Words can lead us astray.

Today, the people of Israel, back in the Land of Israel, are struggling with their unique circumstances. The lexicon of the nations of the world has created a prison of foreign concepts. For the people of Israel, who have always "dwelt apart," and for whom the rules of the rest of the world never worked, a

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unique, separate conceptual framework is necessary. And, of course, there is one.

The Torah sets up this structure. Concepts of Torah origin are eternally applicable to the Jewish nation, its social relationships, its actions in all spheres. Expressions newly coined, borrowed from foreign cultures, do not fit this people. They chafe and irritate until, G-d forbid, they bring us to the point of catastrophe.

Can we still today distinguish between the two — between legitimate Jewish ideas and hopelessly inappropriate imports?

Only by going back, all the way back and consulting the source.

There we find the basic and all-encompassing principle of *ahavat Yisrael*. This is the commandment to love every Jew. It is incompatible with such alien concepts as "tolerance" and "peaceful coexistence" which suggest factions unconcerned with one another's welfare, determined to ignore most of one another's actions so that each can best look after himself.

There is *shalom*, peace, of which so much has always been said. The sages of the Mishna affirm that it is one of the three pillars upon which the world rests. Without peace, we are lost. But there are two other pillars — *emet*, truth, and *din*, justice. On peace alone — peace between true and false, just and unjust ideas — our world totters, and will not stand.

And there are the people of Israel, a sanctified nation, a people from whom great things are demanded. No title, self-assumed or imposed, can supersede the expectation of greatness which the Almighty assigned. Israel, even though he has sinned, remains Israel.

Most Jews today are educated to the thinking of the nations of the world. To liberalism, to the plurality of truth, to live and let live, to the relentless pursuit of happiness. This is their frame of reference. They have not been given a fair chance to examine the alternative of Torah. It cannot realistically be expected that such a Jew will discern the unique suitability of Torah concepts to the people of Israel.

Ironically, because each Jew possesses a divine spark connecting him to Torah, he inwardly resents the suggestion, so thoughtlessly made, that the Torah "belongs" to those who have already learned it. Like a child excluded from a discussion that concerns him, he becomes angry, rebellious.

Thus, for the Jew who has learned Torah, the burden of responsibility is great. He cannot afford to lose sight of the distinction between an authentic term, based in the Torah of Israel, and a false one which deepens the darkness. For him, labeling a member of this holy nation "secular" — whether he knows Torah today or not, whether he is sympathetic now or angry — is unacceptable. (Does the child who sits down against the door, refusing to budge, become a rock, even if he tells you that is what he is?)

Searching the sources for a concept like "status quo", he will recognize, with shame, that it is the very antithesis of everything Torah teaches. The Torah is compared to living waters. To take some of its commandments and leave them as is — status quo — for decades? Water left standing is a breeding site for dread diseases. A holy chosen nation whose Torah, whose life-source, has been left to stagnate will not stand for it. Whether they acknowledge it or not, the chosen people of G-d want to be shown the way. Encountering the wall of a "status quo" arrangement, they find it logically incomprehensible, and deeply disturbing.

The cry "back to the status quo" is meaningless; it is offensive; it is doomed to failure. In the decades since the arrangement was made in desperation, so much has happened, so many have been born...nothing else has remained static! The Almighty does not want those who know Torah to live in "peace" indefinitely with those who don't.

By uprooting extraneous terminology, those who know the vocabulary of Torah can refocus their own thinking. Then they can begin to educate those who lack the tools to make this distinction. The task here suggested is no easy one. Nevertheless, it is the only possible path to take out of the dark forest of confusion and apparent impasses.

Words. The can lead us astray. Paradoxically, tragically, they can be the cause of causeless hatred.

SARA BAR-CHAIM