

In the April 1988 issue of *The Jewish Observer*, Professor Aaron Twerski wrote "An Open Letter to Dr. Norman Lamm," president of Yeshiva University, in response to a *New York Times* article on a "major public address" delivered by Dr. Lamm in Manhattan's Fifth Avenue Synagogue. In his "open letter," Twerski faulted Dr. Lamm for attacking "Right Wing" Orthodoxy and for giving the appearance of dealing with Conservative and Reform leaders with deference and dignity.

In the pages that follow, Dr. Lamm responds to Professor Twerski's letter, and Professor Twerski, in turn, replies.

AN OPEN REPLY TO PROFESSOR AARON TWERSKI

Dear Professor Twerski:
In the April 1988 issue of *The Jewish Observer* you take me to task for a lecture I gave on March 21, reported in *The New York Times* the following day. While I would have preferred the courtesy of your checking the report with me, I do appreciate the respectful and relatively moderate tone of your polemic. And I am grateful to the editors of *JO* for the opportunity to set the record straight and correct the erroneous inferences and unfortunate misinterpretations, many of which are reflected in your "open letter" to me.

First, a word about nomenclature. The words "ultra-Orthodox" and "fundamentalist" were not and are not part of my vocabulary. Indeed, in the lecture I explicitly rejected the use of such pejorative epithets. I referred to "the Right" (which I consider a relative term) and *Haredim*. Moreover, the only mention I made of Hassidism was to bemoan the absence of adequate Hassidic enthusiasm in my own "Centrist" community.

Second, I fail to understand why you brought up the matter of *mechitza*, other than to question whether my views are at variance

with those of my own *rebbe*, Rabbi J.D. Soloveitchik שליט"א. If so, may I inform you that some thirty years ago I wrote what was probably the longest and most widely disseminated defense of *mechitza* and critique of Conservatism. I spoke about it across the country, and risked my own rabbinic position on its account. And my views have not changed.

Third, regarding the attitude to secular culture, your response is disappointing. It is insulting to ascribe to me the view that those who do not subscribe to *Torah Umadda* are "know nothings and

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country bumpkins." *Has mi-le'hazkir!* Most of my *rebbeim*, whom I adored and revered, lacked secular education and yet were the paragons of wisdom. Would you accuse the advocates of *Torah im Derech Eret* of such contempt for East European Jewry which opposed them?

Your assertion that because "right-wing" Jewry is "setting the agenda in so many areas," it somehow proves the high level of openness to the environing culture, is incomprehensible. One does not need an education of any kind in order to advance his or his group's agenda successfully; all he needs is political insight, will, and muscle. *Mah inyan shmitta eitziel Har Sinai?* It should be understood that *Torah Umanida* sees itself as a vision that issues from Torah itself, and is not reducible to technology or vocation or political effectiveness.

I shall not react to your insinuation that all Zionists define Am

Yisrael such that the centrality of Torah is displaced by nationalism, save to ask if anyone has remembered the name of Rav Kook, z"l.

But I shall forego other such inaccuracies and ignore all the rhetorical barbs that are ultimately inconsequential, and concentrate on the main thrust of your article—which entirely misconceives my point of view.

**"SPIRITUAL DIGNITY"—YES:
"LEGITIMACY"—NO**

In my lecture, I advocated acknowledging non-Orthodox groups as "valid" and stated that "if they are sincere in their convictions they possess spiritual dignity," but that we can never accord them halakhic "legitimacy." In your letter, you ask what I mean by "valid groupings," whether it means that they are to be dealt with the way we relate to leaders of secular Jewish

groups, and you offer your opinion that this would hardly pacify Conservative and Reform leadership.

Now, in a footnote on the same page (7) you make reference to an address reprinted in *Moment Magazine*. In that very article I made it abundantly clear what I mean by these three terms. I defined them carefully (if idiosyncratically), specifically to avoid the kind of obfuscation to which they have now fallen victim. So I shall try again.

"Valid" derives from the Latin *validus*, "strong." It refers to an objective fact, irrespective of my approval or disapproval. "Legitimate" comes from the Latin *lex*, "law," and hence, where Jewish matters are concerned, falls within the province of *Halakhah*.

When I recognize heterodox groups as "valid" I mean that not only do I treat their leaders humanly as individuals—presumably we do not disagree on that—but I relate to them as leaders of religious groups within the Jewish community who must and should be worked with respectfully. This *de facto* recognition is not qualitatively different from the way we deal with secular groups, except that they happen to head groups which identify themselves as religious. The Torah refers to pagan priests as *Kohanim*. That is the fact, although we do not go to them for a *brakhah*. Our *Rishonim* spoke of *chakimel ha-Kara'im* ("Karaites rabbis"), yet no "Orthodox" Jews ever asked them a *sh'elah*. Should we deny the same appellation—leaders of Jewish religious groups—to those who are indeed heads of religious Jewish groups who, it so happens, are far more numerous than we are? Neither of us is happy with our contemporary non-Orthodox groups. But you prefer to withhold the acknowledgment of such facts, while I cannot see the point of denying the facts which I cannot wish away. It has nothing to do with "pacifying" anyone. I suppose that if I had to do it all over again, I would have chosen a less equivocal and ambiguous word than "valid."

Which brings me to the legitimacy

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issue. It was clear in my article, and you quoted the passage in your footnote that no Orthodox Jew can legitimate groups which are clearly anti-halalistic including those which are so elastic in their semantics as to make most of their writing on Halakhah meaningless and befuddling. There are, I gather, no differences between us on this point—the most important of all.

With regard to "spiritual dignity," you ask whether the "spiritual dignity" that I confer upon Conservatives and Reform is such that I would not give it as well to a devout Jesuit priest or to a Tibetan monk. But of course! (See *Rambam, Hilchos Shmitta VeYovel* 13.13.) I simply say that if they are religiously sincere—a tautology perhaps, but one that is necessary in light of the fact that so very much of the Orthodox Right takes it for granted that such spiritual dignity is non-existent in the Reform-Conservative camp, and that their sole purpose is to undermine Torah. That they are undermining Torah I of course agree, but that they are all insincere or all have as their overriding ambition to destroy Torah—with that I disagree. Not everyone in this age of opportunism is devious even if in error. That is why it is necessary for me to say so. And I might add that insincere people in our own camp do not possess spiritual dignity.

I therefore categorically reject your conclusion that my ascription of spiritual dignity to deserving deviants Jews "implies granting rabbinic legitimacy" to them. The conclusion does not follow from the premises. Acknowledging integrity is not the same as giving *Semikha*.

PLURALISM—A SACRED COW

The *Times* report was clear that my objection on the "Who is A Jew" issue was to its treatment in the political-legislative arena. For your information, in 1970 I wrote what I believe was the first rationale for our point of view, and it was distributed in the thousands

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That they [the Reform-Conservative camp] are undermining Torah I of course agree, but that they are all insincere or all have as their overriding ambition to destroy Torah—with that I disagree.

by the Lubavitch movement. I have not changed my mind one whit about what I said there and what is now the standard view of all Orthodox groups. My only objection now is to the political fixation on the issue as the single greatest priority on the agenda of Israeli public debate, and on the self-defeating endeavor to push the issue in the Knesset at a time when it has incurred disastrous defeats for us, both in Israel and in the Diaspora, for what is relatively a minor gain in the practical sense.

Why, you ask, do I not speak up clearly on the substantive issue and come against religious pluralism? But I did—in the CLAL lecture (reported in *Moment*) which you cited, in the presence of several hundred leaders of the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Movements, and even some Left Orthodox individuals. I referred to pluralism as a "sacred cow," and explained why I cannot accept it within the religious community. I declared it as a disguised and discredited ethical or religious relativism which leads to spiritual nihilism. "If everything is kosher," I said (and wrote), "nothing is kosher." I did not criticize it from

a comfortable distance, but went into the lions' den, and confronted them with a point of view that they fully understood. But they would not even have considered it worthy of their contempt if I had shouted at them, stamped my foot, and called them all "shkotzim." Is there anything wrong with what you so contemptuously call "the silk language of diplomacy" if it proves effective? Or must I prove my *bona fides* by shouting everyone else?

I admire your brave assertion that, "Torah practiced with integrity and conviction need not be diluted to win over others." Of course I agree! But who is to say that it is rejectionism only that is endowed with "integrity and conviction," whereas inclusivism is a "dilution"? I do not regard Jewish laymen or clergy as outside the purview of *Klal Yisrael* so that we may not recognize their existence or cooperate with them on matters pertaining to our mutual welfare. The *Chazon Ish*, in two separate passages, decides halakhically that *moridin v'ein maalin* is inoperative today: because we are in a state of *hester panim*, and because we are *ke'lifnei tokhachah*. Is not this post-Holocaust period, where we again are painfully aware of our

isolation in the world, a time to seek out reasons and sources to justify *kiruv* instead of *richuk* and inclusion instead of rejection to the maximum degree possible?—to recall the *peshat* of *RaMaH* (to *Sanhedrin*, 52) that *ve'ahava le'etakha kamokha* refers not only to *re'im* (friends) but also *ra'im* (evil-doers)?

A DISPUTE LESHEM SHAMAYIM

I am saddened that the *Times* report, because of its terseness and infelicitous choice of names, caused so much distress and anger in Agudah circles. But I plead with these circles not to be hypersensitive to criticism or differences of opinion. There have always been a multiplicity of approaches and, provided our intentions are genuine and our attitudes respectful, such diversity should be encouraged. On the Mishnah in *Avot* (5:17) that every controversy *le'shem Shamayim* will endure, Rabbenu Yonah comments happily, "such disputes will last forever—today on one issue, tomorrow on another—enduring for all time. And the reward will be long life and many years," to continue such differences. This is tolerance in the authentic Torah spirit. The Agudah has never been overly bashful in criticizing others. It should be willing to accept the right of others to propose constructive differences. Let criticism be welcome—it is the way of life.

You close with the words, "Dr. Lamm, are you there with us?" Yes, Professor Twerski, I am there with you (and possibly before you), together with all Orthodox, G-d fearing, Torah-studying and Israel-loving Jews, whether Centrist or Rightist, whether of one orientation or another. And I shall be there with you and with all my Agudah friends, even when I disagree with you, with *ahava* and *kavod*, whether reciprocated or not.

My hand is outstretched. Will you grasp it?

Cordially yours,
NORMAN LAMM ■

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