

MANHATTAN

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to Israel**

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Passing the Torch

**YU's President
Norman Lamm on
Modern Orthodoxy
and his successor**

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Passing the Torch

YU's Rabbi Norman Lamm talks about Modern Orthodoxy and his successor

By URIEL HEILMAN

When Norman Lamm, president of Yeshiva University, announced earlier this year that he would retire in the summer of 2002, he set off a maelstrom of speculation about who from within the ranks of an increasingly fragmented Orthodox world could take the helm of an institution that, in its effort to be the standard-bearer of

great length. I think our attitude should be one of friendship but no compromise. No compromise. I am not a "pluralist" in the way it is commonly used. I am a pluralist in the philosophical sense. I don't believe that inclusiveness and friendship and co-operation should or may result in a weakening of our commitment to halacha [Jewish law] and to Torah and Torah *U'madda*.

ty—his speaking, his conduct. When a person of this sort passes from the scene, you expect a vacuum of leadership. He was a one-man leader.

But, you know, in the [eight] years since the Rav passed away, we still miss him, but everyone who was a student of his still speaks about him, mentions his original Torah commentaries, his philosophical attitudes. We debate them; they're alive. And young men have come up who are *roshei yeshiva* [heads of yeshivas] who are doing brilliantly. Is any of them the equivalent of the Rav? I don't think so. I don't think we'll see it for generations....

We can't really predict what's going on. If it seems to some that there is now a desert, don't forget we have no way of knowing what seeds are buried just beneath the surface and will sprout and will develop a new generation of leaders and high-grade people.

UH: In the last few years there's been a proliferation of new institutions on the left and right ends of Modern Orthodoxy. Do you feel that's a bad thing or a good thing?

I think it's a bad thing if it's empire building. It's a good thing if Torah and Torah *U'madda* is presented.

UH: Some of the founders of these institutions come from Yeshiva in one way or another, and in creating these institutions have said that Yeshiva was unable to meet their needs. Is Yeshiva trying to respond to these kinds of needs in any way?

I don't think there's really a good reason for these defections to have taken place. I think we have enough diversity within Yeshiva itself to accommodate all of them.

UH: Where does Edah—the new group whose motto is "The courage to be modern and Orthodox"—fit into the Jewish denominational spectrum?

It would fit in on the left end of Modern Orthodoxy....

In a democracy—and, perforce, we are in a democracy—many opinions sprout, and the ideal is that they should be able to talk to each other. Now there is a danger that in modern Orthodoxy, too, we are not talking to each other enough. And I am upset with the anti-Edah sentiment as much as I am upset with the Edah critique and [of] going a bit too far in its direction.

Revolution sounds good to someone who is a teenager; but more mature and responsible people know that things have to evolve. You don't throw out the baby with the bathwater. I think that there's too much delegitimization taking place within the

Modern Orthodox camp, as there is in the *haredi* [ultra-Orthodox] camp, not only of each other, but internally. That's why in Yeshiva I've been pleading with students. Students who are the *beis medrash* type should not look askance at those who are not. And the others who may be closer in appearance and in perception to the typical college student should not look down upon or with anger at the *beis medrash* type.

We are living in one institution, and one of the things we have to learn is mutual respect and tolerance.

UH: Let's talk about Yeshiva's new graduate Talmud program for women.

There's a graduate program for women. It's an experimental school. It's doing extremely well. It's in its second year now. It's not part of Stern [College]. It's situated at Stern. It's an independent program. It's a graduate program without giving a degree, although we do encourage most of the students

PROFILE

Modern Orthodoxy in the U.S., seeks to be at once a yeshiva and a university.

Well-aware of naysayers who warn that YU will not be able to find someone who can be both university president and *rosh yeshiva* (yeshiva head), and will need two directors, Rabbi (Dr.) Lamm says, "You can't separate 'Yeshiva' from 'University' without damage."

It would be a "schizoid existence," he said in a speech at YU's annual dinner in June. He urged his supporters to keep faith in YU's dual mission, Torah *U'madda*—literally, Torah learning and scientific or secular learning. "I plead with you," he said. "Do not believe that we are the last of the Mohicans.... We will continue, we will rise, and we will conquer."

As YU's selection committee narrows down its list of candidates for the presidency, the 70-year-old Lamm is taking stock of his 25 years at YU, 50 years in Jewish communal life and the future of both the school—which this year reported its largest undergraduate enrollment ever—and Modern Orthodoxy.

He recently sat down to share some of his thoughts. Excerpts from the interview follow.

UH: How has Yeshiva University changed in your quarter-century tenure?

We have a closer relationship with Israel, where every year we have hundreds of our students in the [S.] Daniel Abraham [freshman-year-in-] Israel program. As a matter of fact, this year, with all that's happened in Israel—with all the problems of terrorism—when one of the Jewish newspapers announced that less than 50 percent are coming to Hebrew University and to other universities—we maintained an identical number to last year, not counting *shana bet* [those who return to Israel for a second year of study prior to starting their sophomore year at YU]. If you count them, then we have an increase in the number of students in Israel this year, which is over 600. I think that tells you a great deal about the attitude of our Modern Orthodox community—especially Yeshiva University—toward Israel. It's very strong.

I think that probably most of our undergraduates do entertain in one way or another the promise of aliyah [moving to Israel]. Whether it works out or not is another story, but they certainly take it seriously.

UH: Yet in recent articles and speeches you've lamented a growing rift between Israeli and American Jewry.

Sure. I was concerned about it. Not that it affected Yeshiva. I'm speaking about a larger scene, when you have as a result of the increased assimilation of American Jewry a younger generation that can boast of having visited Italy, France, Nepal—but not Israel. On the other side, you have Israelis, post-Zionist, postmodernist groups, which would like to strip Israel of every scintilla of Jewish context. So that's pulling apart. We've got to be there to pull together.

UH: What do you think should be the nature of the relationship between Orthodoxy and non-Orthodox Jews?

I've written about that at great length. I've talked about it at



This is the sixth in a series of exclusive interviews with major leaders on the American Jewish scene.

'We are living in one institution, and one of the things we have to learn is mutual respect and tolerance.'

UH: Is the Modern Orthodox community suffering from a lack of leadership?

Let's take this in perspective. Look at history. After Maimonides died, there wasn't another Maimonides to fill his shoes for many, many centuries. But Judaism survived. Look at the secular world. After the Greeks—Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, especially Aristotle, who was a powerful figure—there were very few people who could really say they inherited a mantle or they filled the shoes of an Aristotle.... It's true: The giants died. But you know, we made it.

And since then, other people have come up who are giants in a different sense. The Rav [Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, whom many consider the ideological father of American Modern Orthodoxy as it exists today] was a unique figure in Jewish history. He was really the Maimonides of our age. In addition to his vast learning in Torah, in addition to his great endowments in general culture, he was a charismatic personali-

'Not everyone approved of training women in Talmud at the highest level. Part of their argument was "It's a slippery slope." And my response was, "The slippery slope may be a pretty good metaphor for all of life, not only Jewish but non-Jewish life." We're all living on a slippery slope.'

to get degrees in Azrieli [Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration]. We do not demand it...It's a program of Yeshiva University, cofounded by the Avi Chai Foundation.

UH: How big is it?

We aim at getting 10 [students]. Anything from eight to 12. These are young women with good Jewish backgrounds in learning who want to devote themselves to two years of in-depth study of Talmud and some related subjects. It's Torah *lishma* [for its own sake] in the purest sense. They do not have ambitions to become rabbis. They do not necessarily have ambitions to use it in any way. But they are totally committed to learning for its own sake.

UH: What was the reasoning behind creating this new program?

It was created now because in the high schools which we serve—that's not only our high schools, but many of the Modern Orthodox high schools— young women have been exposed to Talmud. And they have expressed a desire to learn it on the highest levels and we have accommodated them. It has not been done without criticism, but so what?

UH: How have the more conservative elements in your institution reacted to this development?

There was criticism. At a meeting of *roshei yeshiva* that took place about a year ago, only one man spoke up against it. All the others did not support him, and that one man is no longer with us at Yeshiva.

UH: Because of this?

I suppose this may have been a contributing factor.

UH: Is there a growing need for programs that offer high-level women's Talmud study?

There certainly is a need for a small institution, which may well grow larger as time goes on. But don't forget, there are some very outstanding programs in all fields which have very few people. These are the pioneers.

UH: Is this course of scholarship enough for these women? Do you think that at some point they might want to take things to another level? Will these women or their successors ask, "What's next for us?"

What's next for them is a lifetime of learning. What do you do with young men who are fine *talmidei chachamim* [Torah scholars] who become lawyers or doctors? What do they do with all the years of Talmud preparation? They learn on their own. They go to a class. They continue. The women want to do the same thing.

UH: And some of them become rabbis and heads of yeshivas.

And some of these [women] may become teachers of Talmud in girls' high schools, or on the higher level, they may become teachers of Talmud in Stern, or in the next graduate program, as it develops. And we treat them, in a sense, like *kollel* students. They get a relatively good stipend.

UH: What sort of change—if any—does this portend for the way the Modern Orthodox community views women's leadership roles?

We're struggling with it. Not everyone approved of training women in Talmud at the highest level. Part of their argument was "It's a slippery slope." And my response was, "The slippery slope may be a pretty good metaphor for all of life, not only Jewish but non-Jewish life." We're all living on a

mitment to full-time learning. I am pleasantly amazed at how quickly they integrate into their own thinking Talmudic methodology—its vocabulary, its methodology. I'm overwhelmed.

UH: As rabbi emeritus of the Jewish Center in Manhattan, which houses the Drisha Institute, how do you feel about Drisha's new egalitarian-style Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur prayer service?

I know that it has made many people unhappy. It has made me unhappy too. I don't believe it belongs in the Jewish Center, and its problem is they rented the space, and it's a problem that I can't really address because I'm not the rabbi of the Jewish Center.

UH: A recent article in *Commentary* magazine blasted Orthodox religious and communal leaders for not doing enough to combat rising messianic sentiment among some—particularly Lubavitcher hasidim—in its ranks. Do you see this as a problem?

I don't think I can find a single messianist in the entire Yeshiva University family. Messy? Yes. Messianist? No.

UH: What about within the Orthodox community itself?

The RCA [Rabbinical Council of America] came out with a resolution against it. Yeshiva University is not a rabbinic organization. It's not a political organization. It should not be expected to have me comment about every phenomenon that takes place in Jewish life. Am I a messianist? No. I'm a messianist only insofar as I believe that *mashiach* [the messiah] has yet to come. Am I a messianist who believes that a dead *mashiach* will come back? No, of course not. It's irrational. It's outrageous. It's unprecedented since the 17th century...

There is a vast difference between this messianism and the messianism of Shabtai Tzvi or Christianity. And that is that here the Lubavitcher messianists don't believe in abrogating the Torah or suspending mitzvot...

I think that Dr. [David] Berger [author of the article in *Commentary* magazine, which was adapted from his new book, entitled *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference*] is right in objecting to them very vociferously. I at the same time do not believe that the majority of Lubavitchers are messianists. The question is if they are or they aren't you have to ask them...Something as ludicrous as a messianic claim—especially the claim that a dead messiah will come back to life—makes all Orthodox Jews suspect in the eyes of those who never liked them in the first place.

UH: Why are you retiring now?

I've been in Jewish public life for exactly 50 years. I got *smicha* [rabbinical ordination] in 1951. I began my rabbinate in June or July of that year, and I feel that 50 years is a long time....I feel that I still have a lot of things I want to do that I perhaps cannot do as well if I have the responsibilities of the presidency of Yeshiva.

It means that I want to devote more time to my writing, although I've done a number of books that I've published while in office, but there are many things I want to say that are best said in writing. I want to speak out on issues without any constraints—which are normal, expected and appropriate for the head of an institution. I hope I will always be connected to Yeshiva because my board has asked me to stay on as chancellor, in which role I will try to help my successor...

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slippery slope.

The same argument could have been used against the Hafetz Haim [Rabbi Israel Meir HaKohen of Radun, Lithuania, a 19th-century rabbinical authority] and the Gerrer Rebbe [Rabbi Pinchas Menachem, a 19th-century hasidic rabbinic authority] who approved of the Beis Yaakov [girls'] school when it was founded. And indeed, that was the argument that was given: slippery slope. So if this slippery slope results in women becoming adept in *gemara*, fine. Let's slide down that.

When it comes to the point of women rabbis—I spoke with many of these women—they laugh at me when I say that. They're not interested in it at all. They're interested in Torah *lishma*.

These women who are going to this program are not political feminists. They're not looking to get the same positions that men have all over. In Judaism, what they are interested in is Talmud, [the study of] Torah for its own sake. I have to plead with them to take courses in Azrieli at the same time to get their master's degrees so they can teach.

UH: Is this program competing for students in the scholars' circle program at the Drisha Institute for Jewish Women [in Manhattan]?

Our program is far more intensive in its *gemara* [Talmud], and the young women are being exposed to the best of our faculty, either directly or indirectly.

They have very good rabbis, and they also have opportunities through other means of studying. And they're on the highest level. I'm amazed at their passion for learning, at their com-

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I want to continue my education. There are many things that I have not had the opportunity to do that many of my undergraduates are doing. First of all, I want to continue learning [Torah] *b'iyun*—in depth; I want to go back to early American history, which I don't know enough about [and] some of the great works of literature. I want to think—a very important activity for which you don't have time if you're a busy executive.

UH: In the months since you announced your retirement, many observers have suggested that Yeshiva will have a hard time finding a new president who embodies and can uphold Yeshiva University's dual focus on Torah and secular studies. Do you agree?

I think there are a number of people who could do it. It doesn't mean that they are all equally qualified. But from the point of view of the ideals of Yeshiva University and the ideology of Torah *U'madda*, there are a number of people who could do it.

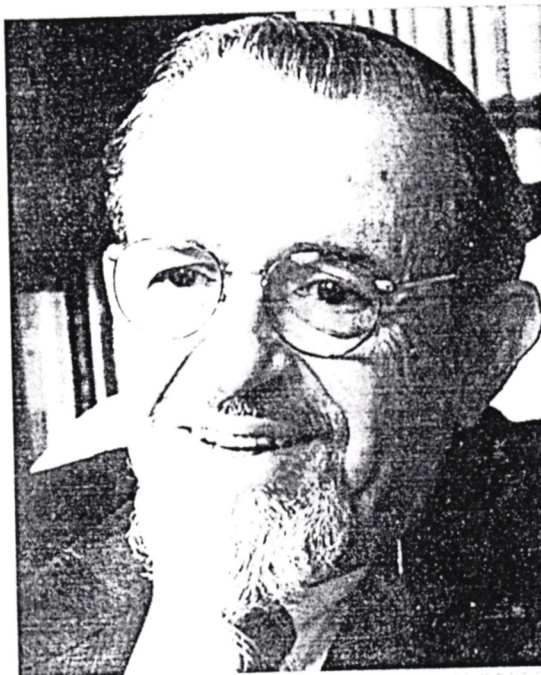
UH: Some of the names that have been mentioned as possible successors have been

from outside the U.S. Is that a problem for an American institution?

No problem. As long as it is a person who understands and can blend into the American Jewish cultural scene. If someone comes from a country where the whole structure of universities is radically different from ours, it will be difficult to fit in because the learning curve is too long for him to be effective. It also has to be a person who understands what a yeshiva is, and knows yeshivas and has gone to yeshivas, and can appreciate the ways in which the yeshiva part of Yeshiva University is the same as and different from other yeshivas.

UH: How does Yeshiva University seek to maintain balance between the ideology of the yeshiva and that of the university?

The whole concept of



Yeshiva University—the whole concept of Torah *U'madda*—is a very tense thing. It's a tension that keeps you on your feet at all times, but at the same time is very exciting because even from a purely anthropological point of view, you're sustaining a culture which is complex rather than simple. Simpleminded people say "Either-or." Everything is black or white. But we know that that is not so. There are blacks and there are whites—but there is more that's gray. This gray area is where you have to make judgment calls.

I think the most important things in life are neither black nor white. When it comes to education—to what we're doing—similarly, there are those who would say "Torah! Torah only!" And those who say "[Torah] is only a course. What counts mostly is medicine, law, psychology, social work." The truth is we can be both. And many people don't understand that even though there is no clear line separating them, even though the two of them at certain points may be in tension with each other, my response is yes—of course it is—but that's human. And not only that, but that tension can be very creative.