

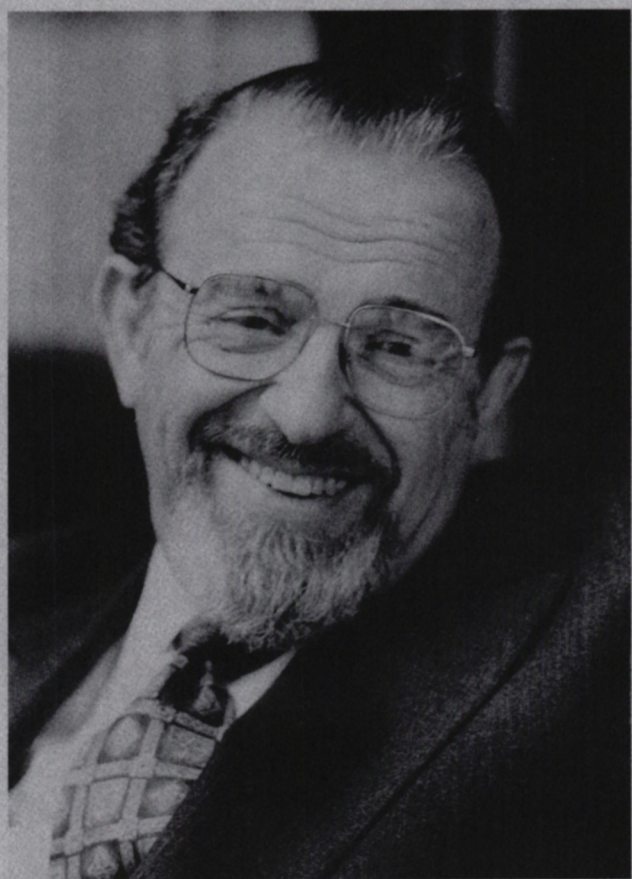
Past P R E S E N T FUTURE

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*An address delivered by Rabbi Norman Lamm at the dinner celebrating his
25th anniversary as President & Rosh HaYeshiva of the
Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary*



Past P R E S E N T FUTURE

"...Because I believe that to live is to learn, and that when you stop learning you have effectively stopped living, I wish to summarize for myself certain lessons that I learned from my combined experiences. Perhaps they may prove of relevance to others, even if they sound banal and ordinary. Even cliches may contain kernels of truth. So I share with you some hard-earned lessons of these past 50 years."

Dr. Norman Lamm

I am exceedingly grateful to all who came to honor me this evening; you make it difficult for me to avoid the sin of pride. I confess that I wondered if this gathering was in the nature of a premature צאתכם לשלום or a belated שפטרני ברוך; the previous speakers have somewhat reassured me and thus given me the courage to address you this evening.

I am flattered and humbled by your decision to mark the 25th year of my presidency by naming the *Kollel le'Horaah* (*Yadin Yadin*) for me. My father ע"ה would have been pleased, because he always wanted me to receive this additional level of ordination. Unfortunately, no such program existed when I was a student at Yeshiva. Now, if I don't have *Yadin Yadin*, at least I have a Kollel by that name! I am grateful beyond words. My father would have been proud—of you, as much as of me.

Many friends have expressed concern at the announcement that I intend to retire next year, and have pleaded with me to reconsider. I am not one to disregard the advice of friends, so let me say this: *I do not intend to step down from the presidency of Yeshiva.* Rather, I intend to step *up* to the chancellorship... I have no intention of abandoning Yeshiva. I never will! I hope to be available to help and guide for as long as such guidance is wanted and as long as the Almighty grants me the years and the strength.

My remarks will concern the past, the present, and the future. Let me begin with the past.

I conclude this year not only 25 years as president of YU-RIETS, but also 50 years of *avodat ha-kodesh*, of sacred service to the Jewish community, especially the Torah community. The first quarter century I spent in the rabbinate, the second in the academic leadership of Yeshiva.

Because I believe that to live is to learn, and that when you stop learning you have effectively stopped living, I wish to summarize for myself certain lessons that I learned from my combined experiences. Perhaps they may prove of relevance to others, even if they sound banal and ordinary. Even clichés may contain kernels of truth. So I share with you some hard-earned lessons of these past 50 years.

I learned that all idols have clay feet, and that every human being, no matter how low on the ladder of success, possesses sparks of greatness; that some of the mightiest have fatal weaknesses, and the weakest hidden sources of surprising strength; that almost every closet contains a skeleton, and even the hardest of hearts a grain of goodness, a molecule of compassion; that the smart are not always wise, and the wise not always smart; that no one knows everything, but everyone knows something worth knowing; that the rich are often vulnerable, and the poor often resolute; that the pious can be tempted, and the sinners tempered. I learned of the secret follies of the sophisticated, and the flashes of insight of ordinary folk.

What did all this knowledge bring me? It taught me that I must judge people with understanding and compassion; that foolishness and weakness and ignorance and spite and envy are, at bottom, part of our human endowment, and that we must all struggle to restrain them; that some are more successful in this encounter than others, but no one ever achieves complete and permanent victory, for the battle goes on endlessly in the soul of man. And also that every human being has the capacity for decency and goodness and compassion and friendship and love. Therefore, I must be tolerant and respectful and civil—even towards those with whom I profoundly disagree. In a word, I had to relearn what I learned but did not understand in my youth, namely, that *דרכיה דרכי נועם וכל נתיבותיה שלום*...The Torah's ways are the ways of pleasantness and its paths are the paths of peace. And so must be our ways and paths.

In my work for Yeshiva, I benefited greatly from the decency and generosity of spirit of countless individuals. I also suffered **בזיונות**—insults, unfair and derogatory criticism—on behalf of you, the schools and community I love and champion—from Right and from Left. (I consider myself an equal opportunity target!) Because of the virtue of moderation and tolerance—**נזעם דרכי**—that I learned these 50 years, I am moved to forgive those who would never forgive me. I would suffer the slings and arrows again gladly on behalf of this cause and my people, ready to be *mekabbel yisurim be'ahavah*—to embrace suffering with love—because one never tires of defending his or her home—*be'ahavah*, with love.



I turn now to the present. I cannot impress upon you the importance of what RIETS is doing. Even if you think you know—even if I think *I* know—we do not know enough, and we should know more.

Let me share with you a few reports by outside observers. The first comes from a letter from a non-alumnus, a distinguished lawyer in Jerusalem:

A coworker of mine happened to be speaking with Rav___, the rosh yeshiva of [a yeshiva beyond the Green Line], who told him: Whenever I travel on an airplane and I see someone carrying a briefcase with a laptop computer and a *Gemara*, I know this is a YU graduate. Rav___ said he watches these men with envy: they spend part of the trip working on computers, part of the trip reading business reports, and part of the trip learning *Gemara*. Rav___ said he was envious that neither his yeshiva nor any other yeshiva in Israel can produce this type of individual.

The second testimony is something I received in the mail last week: a handwritten letter on two scraps of paper by a rabbi (whom I do not know) who had just returned from a lengthy stay at Methodist Hospital in New York, where he was attended by physicians with YU backgrounds. He was astounded by their human touch and sensitivity—and professional competence—as well as by the readiness of these physicians and other YU alumni on staff to engage him in *divrei*

Torah. He concludes his brief note as follows: “Thanks to YU, Methodist Hospital is 3/4 of a *Beis Medrash*...”

The final item comes from a series of articles in the *London Daily Telegraph*, April 10, 2001. The writer is a highly intelligent and well read non-Jewish journalist who was intrigued by the Jews and was searching for their “secret.” He visited with us a few months ago. He writes:

Nobody will ever begin to understand the Jews until they have visited a yeshiva—a school for the study of the Talmud—and seen hundreds of young men engaged in a passionate discussion of its text.

It was nine in the evening when I arrived at the Yeshiva University in New York. A buzz of furious sound was coming from one of its libraries. Here, in a largish room, were 400 young men, sitting in pairs across desks rather like chess players and surrounded by piles of hefty tomes, arguing heatedly. It could scarcely have been more different from the obligatory silence of the Bodleian. They were all studying the Talmud, line by line, and this was no exercise in dry scholarship. As I soon realized, I was in the presence of the fissile core of Judaism...

I have never, in any university or school, seen such intellectual intensity, such absorption, such total fascination. All these young men were in that library entirely voluntarily. They gained no extra credits for being there. All of them had already done either a full day of study or endured a long and bruising session on Wall Street. One of the people I talked to was a merchant banker, another a derivatives trader at Goldman Sachs.

So cherish this great, historic institution. You will need it for your children and grandchildren. There’s nothing quite like it anywhere else in the world. Give it your love. Give it your support. It is worthy of your best efforts.

Let me now turn to the future.

We must resolutely reaffirm the mutually beneficial relationship between the University and RIETS. Legally, the two schools are separate corporate bodies, and so they are indeed. Nevertheless, the spiritual bond between them continues as it should. We often say that “RIETS is the heart of Yeshiva.” It deserves reiteration. The heart is an organ that can be detached from the body; it can survive an operation whereby the heart is treated outside the body. But who wants to spend the rest of his mortal existence in such a precarious and unnatural state? So we must make every effort to enhance good relationships. The heart must always be integrated with the body.

Yeshiva and RIETS will soon be choosing the future leadership of our combined institution. I have been, and will be, addressing the appropriate official bodies on this matter in detail. But I feel it is important for me to say this now, in public, to the Yeshiva family at large.

When Moses prepared to step down from his leadership role, he prayed, **יפקד ה' אלקי הרוחות לכל בשר איש על העדה:** “Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the community.” Moses wanted to be succeeded by someone very much like himself, “a man for all seasons,” one blessed with diverse talents—**הרוחות**, “spirits,” in the plural. God’s answer was clear: **קח לך את יהושע בן נון איש בו רוח**. Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man who possesses **רוח** “spirit,” in the singular. It is not necessary for a leader to have all “spirits,” all talents, all powers and potencies. It is enough if he has **רוח**, spirit—courage, passion, inspiration, resolve, determination. Not everyone can or need be a Moses. And note: neither Moses nor God asks for more than one person to fill Moses’ enormous shoes. There is no talk of a division of labor, one to serve as general and the other as *rosh yeshiva*. Each considered only one person—**איש**. And **רוח**, spirit, “fire in the belly,” is a more important token of future success as a leader than **רוחות**, a bundle of talents full blown.

I firmly believe that one person should serve in both presidencies. The dual presidency will guarantee the smooth functioning of the entire institution. You cannot separate Yeshiva from University without injuring Yeshiva University. Divide them, and you will have institutionalized a fundamental division between RIETS and YU and, even more significantly, between Torah and Madda. Yeshiva will not be

able to overcome this schizoid existence and still remain true to its sacred mission.

Moreover, a dual presidency is a *symbol* of the ultimate synergy between Torah and Madda. Let me offer an example from my own experience. At the beginning of my tenure as president, some 23 or 24 years ago in the midst of our financial crisis, I was told that the beautiful dome of our Main Building, now known as David H. Zysman Hall, was leaking and in danger of collapse. It could be repaired, but the cost would be prohibitive. I was advised: it is more prudent to get rid of the dome altogether. It was altogether logical: the repair costs far more than we can afford, hence it is best to be done with it and remove it. Yet I resisted because this building is not only a landmark—it is vital to the mental image of Yeshiva, and the dome is more than a logo; it is its crown, the symbol of our home. Without it, our symbol fails; our reputation, like our edifice, is decapitated.

If that is true for a mute piece of architecture, how much more so for the living leadership of this, our great home. The president, as a symbol, should be a PhD and a *lamdan*. He should have an advanced academic degree and be a *rav*. You are probably aware that NYU recently elected Dr. John Sexton as its new president. Wouldn't it be nice if we upstaged NYU by having as our president not a *sexton* but a *rabbi*?...

Finally, let me leave you with a plea to preserve our unique vision.

Orthodoxy today is divided roughly into two camps. We need and must cherish both, for who can tell which will better survive and thrive in the long trajectory of history? Therefore we must respect and cooperate with each other. Never must we look down upon our *haredi* brethren. They have amongst them people of exemplary devotion and sacrifice, of great scholarship, of humane outlook and love of Torah. Whether or not they reciprocate, we must value them—at the same time that we disagree. The *haredim* are more inwardly inclined, they reject advanced secular studies except for vocational (*parnasah*) reasons, they are skeptical of the State of Israel although devoted to Eretz Israel, etc. Our vision, rooted in Torah, is different, although what we share in common is far greater than the differences between us. That vision includes: Torah Umadda, maximum openness towards all Jews within the confines of Halakhah, a positive attitude towards the State of Israel, and universal concerns. At root, the differences are as much psychological as philosophical.

We read this coming Shabbat of the 12 princes whom Moses sent to spy out the Land of Canaan—the land they were preparing to conquer and settle. Moses' instructions to them were, "See what kind of country it is. Are the people strong or weak, few or many? ...Are the towns they live in open or fortified—**הבמחנים אם במבצרים**?" And so on. The spies returned with two reports. The majority of 10 was discouraging: it is rich country, fertile, flowing with milk and honey, but the giants who populate the land dwell in strong fortresses: **והערים והערסות גדולות מאד בצורות גדולות מאד**. Caleb and Joshua came back with far more encouragement. We can rise up against them, possess the land, and we shall overcome them: **עלה נעלה וירשנו אתה כי יכול נוכל לה**. The rebuttal of the majority was firm: we cannot do it, they are too strong: **לא נוכל לעלות**. The conflict was joined, the people sided with the majority, and the result was utter chaos, disaster. The refusal of the people to trust the Almighty turned the entire incident into an historic tragedy.

But there are some troubling questions in this account. For one, weren't the 10 telling the truth as they saw it? Isn't that what they were commissioned to do? And second, what lay at the root of the disagreement—was it mere opinion about strategy, or was something more involved?

I believe that there were serious and fundamental differences in approach and in interpretation. And it revolved around the understanding of what Moses meant when he said **הבמחנים אם במבצרים**, if the cities were open or fortified. The majority considered that open cities were conquerable, but fortresses were not. But that was not what Moses meant! As Rashi, quoting the Midrash, explains: **סימן מסר להם: אם בפרזים יושבין, חזקים הם שסומכין על גבורתם, ואם בערים חלשים הם**—if they live in open cities, it is a sign that they are powerful, for they are confident of their strength; but if they live in fortresses, they are weak.

We at YU and RIETS hold that openness is a sign of courage and confidence, and that a fortress psychology issues from fear and frailty. I have no complaints against those who prefer the protection of fortresses. And I have no sympathy for those who would leave us totally exposed and defenseless against the onslaught of a materialistic and hedonistic society. But we feel confident and, despite the risks—and who has no risks?—we will prevail and help keep Torah and the Torah tradition alive without artificial walls. Our Yeshiva has pioneered an educational system founded on confidence and strength,

one that does not rely on ghetto walls—coerced or voluntary—to sustain us. We can meet modernity head on, critically but openly, and we shall prevail. **יכול נוכל לה.**

I plead with you: do not be discouraged by the gloomy prognosticators, even those within our own ranks, who tell us that our cause is doomed. Do not be demoralized by hand-wringing peddlers of pessimism. If others tell us that **לא נוכל לעלות כי חזק הוא ממנו**, let us respond: **עלה נעלה**. **אתה כי יכול נוכל לה**. We are sufficiently bold and self-assured to say that we stand for Torah Umadda not only for vocational purposes but for an engagement with the powerful culture of our times on its highest levels—scientific, humanistic, sociological, literary. When our great and revered teacher, the Rav, went to study at the University of Berlin at the behest of his parents, he did so not for **פרנסה**, to study accounting or marketing or even medicine or law—and certainly not to dodge the Russian draft. He went to encounter Kant and Cohen and Einstein. We intend to learn from him. We are no less human for our devotion to Torah; and we are no less Jewish for our commitment to **חכמות העולם**. That is what we are all about. Be proud of it, encourage it, publicize it, love it... **עלה נעלה אתה כי יכול נוכל לה**. We shall overcome all obstacles—and prevail.



I came here as a student 56 years ago, and I have been president and *Rosh ha-Yeshiva* of RIETS for 25 years. Now, as I near my own change of status, I offer a **תודה מזמור**, a psalm of thanksgiving, to all those who made my life fuller—if not always easier—but richer, more meaningful, more helpful, more focussed, more rewarding.

I learned much from my colleagues, the *roshei yeshiva*, whose commitment and erudition never fail to astound me; and **מתלמידי יותר**, from my students above all. Many of them are stars; all of them are serious and committed. They are magnificent, the very promise of our future. I have confidence in them; they will rise—**עלה נעלה אתה כי יכול נוכל לה**—and they and our alumni will help usher in a renaissance of Jewish life and learning in their generation.

I thank you, our Board members and supporters, for the unstinting generosity which made it possible for RIETS to become the powerful and enlightened center of **התורה הרבצת** that it is for well over a century.

I thank my colleagues in administration—vice presidents, deans, directors, staff, all—for their professional competence, for their sacrifice of time and peace of mind, for their personal loyalty and genuine friendship. I thank you for doing what is often a thankless job.

All of you, and many others who are not here, have given me the opportunity to serve עם ישראל and הקב"ה in ways and to an extent I never imagined in my youth. You have allowed me to dedicate whatever meager talents I possess to the noblest of all causes: the advancement of Torah, without which our people have no future; and without Jews, the world would be a grim place indeed—more dangerous and less interesting.

Above all, I am deeply indebted to my beloved family—my four children, who together have attended eight of our schools; my four children-in-law, who likewise have attended eight of our schools, from high school through *semikhab*; my brother, Rabbi Maurice Lamm—a *musmakh* and Yeshiva College alumnus, and my two sisters—one here, one in Israel—who went through two of our schools; and my grandchildren, one now in Stern College, one coming into MSTa, and one slated for Stern College this coming semester. They are dearer to me than life itself. So my family has benefited enormously from Yeshiva, and Yeshiva from them. I am proud of them, more than they may be of me.

The purpose of RIETS is to increase the sacred knowledge of Torah, and the purpose of the University is likewise to increase knowledge—of all things, all branches of wisdom. The Sages taught us that knowledge is not an end in itself: (ברכות דף י"ז) תכלית חכמה תשובה ומעשים טובים. To put it another way, wisdom—of Torah or other discipline—must lead to character.

So I conclude with a brief description of the Jewish ideal of character. A בעל מידות is essentially one who is modest and retiring without false humility; one who aspires to enlightenment without seeking the limelight; one who is a אהב שלום ורודף שלום—who loves and pursues peace, thus never fomenting dissension unnecessarily, never speaking ill of others; one who is utterly loyal, a ידיד נאמן, whose character is elegant and charming; and, above all, who—as Ramban expands upon the commandment to love one's neighbor as one's self—

שיאהב חבירו בכל ענין כאשר יאהב את נפשו בכל
הטוב - יהיה אוהבו בכל, יחפוץ שיזכה רעהו האהוב לו
בעושר ובנכסים וכבוד ובדעת ובחכמה, ולא שישוה אליו
אבל יהיה חפץ בלבו לעולם שיהיה הוא יותר ממנו בכל
טובה.

One must love one's fellow in all matters as he loves
himself, [desiring] all good things [for him], loving him
in all matters, desiring to obtain for his beloved friend
wealth and goods and glory and knowledge and wis-
dom—and not only that his friend be equal to him, but
always wishing in his heart that the friend exceed him
in all good things.

I have had and do have the exquisite blessing of learning from such a
friend, benefiting from her for over 47 years in love and devotion—
the wonderful, gracious, giving mother of my children and the
grandmother of our fabulous grandchildren. שלי ושלכם שלה הוא.

Thank you, Mindella.

And I thank all of you. May the רבש"ע grant you and your families
many happy years of health and vigor, love of God, of Torah, of
Israel, and of all humans; and may the final redemption arrive
בחייו וביומיו, “during your lifetime and during your days, and during
the lifetime of all the House of Israel, speedily and soon.” Amen.

