

On Tuesday, March 22, Dr. Norman Lamm, the president of Yeshiva University, spoke in Manhattan's Fifth Avenue Synagogue. His remarks were widely disseminated. In fact, *The New York Times* devoted considerable coverage to the event. The title of his address was "Centrist Orthodoxy: Agenda and Vision, Successes and Failures." *The Times* report began:

"Ultra-orthodox Jews, including Hasidim, have set the religious agenda for too long in both the United States and Israel, the president of Yeshiva University said Tuesday, calling on moderate Orthodox elements to reassert themselves....

"Dr. Lamm said the ultra-Orthodox has been 'powered by triumphalism,' which he defined as an attitude of, 'We are winning, therefore we are right.'"

This was not his first time to have attacked the Orthodox right and not the first time that he has sought to rally "centrists" to action. Due to the public nature of his statement, his words should not pass without comment. As a step toward dispelling some of the wrong impressions that were created by his statement, *The Jewish Observer* presents Professor Aaron Twerski's

## OPEN LETTER TO DR. NORMAN LAMM

Dear Dr. Lamm שמואל:

The remarks that follow are not intended to serve as a rebuttal to you. Nor do they constitute a retreat. As a card-carrying member of the "triumphalist... Orthodox right,"<sup>1</sup> and a Hassid, to boot, I am confident

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enough to state without equivocation that our agenda for action will remain very much in place. But I am genuinely confused as to the substantive nature of the "centrist" view of things, as you espoused them. You did make a point of saying that you spoke as president of Rabbi Isaac Elchonon Theological Seminary, putting your words into a religious framework. All the more reason that your statement is worthy of scrutiny—and all the more do I find it disturbing.

Your remarks "were not an attack, but an attempt at self-definition." The definition followed: "Unlike... the right wing<sup>2</sup>... the centrist group is open to secular culture, is un-

1. All quotes are from *The New York Times* March 22, 1988, unless otherwise attributed. As I was not present at Dr. Lamm's address, my comments are based on the *Times* article as well as other annotated sources of Dr. Lamm's pronouncements on the issue.

2. For the record, I find "right-wing" as meaningless a term as "centrist." I consider our approach mainstream, and would like to know the parameters of the field in which Dr. Lamm places Modern Orthodoxy in "the center."



## Jewish Moderate Urges Believers to Take Stand

BY ARI L. GOLDMAN

Ultra-orthodox Jews, including the Hasidim, have set the religious agenda for too long in both the United States and Israel, the president of Yeshiva University said Tuesday, calling on moderate Orthodox elements to reassert themselves.

In a major speech on "Centrist Orthodoxy," the president, Dr. Norman Lamm, addressed a question that also has echoes in other faiths: in an age when fundamentalists are flexing their religious muscle, can moderate voices be heard?

"Moderation should never be confused with indecisiveness," Dr. Lamm said Tuesday night before a crowd of 400 at the Fifth Avenue Synagogue, 5 East 62d Street. "On the contrary, a basis of self-confidence in one's most basic commitments is often expressed in extremism. Only one who is sure of what he stands for can afford to be moderate. A strong heart can risk being an open heart."

Dr. Lamm, who is also a rabbi, said he was moved to delineate where centrist Orthodox stands and to articulate what he saw as its legitimacy because it has become "embattled" both from the right and from the other major branches, the Conservative and Reform. He said his remarks were not an attack, but an attempt at self-definition. "Our camp needs an injection of courage right now," he said.

On the Secular Culture  
Since he was dealing with a religious matter, Dr. Lamm said he was speaking as the president of Yeshiva's affiliated seminary, the Peshita Institute.



Dr. Norman Lamm speaking Tuesday night in Manhattan.

One of the speakers...

... For its part, Yeshiva University has publicly honored and fawned over Teddy Kollek and other vehemently anti-religious Zionist leaders. As I said, further discussion on these topics will have to wait for another occasion for a fuller treatment.

### "VALID GROUPINGS, SPIRITUAL DIGNITY"

The centrists' tolerance of different opinions, as it contrasts with "right wing intolerance," however, raises too many questions to permit us to postpone discussion. Exactly where do we differ? *The New York Times* quotes you as saying:

"Rightist Orthodoxy concludes that since ... [the Conservative and Reform] are not legitimate, we must have no truck with them at all. Centrist Orthodoxy holds that one must indeed disagree with the non-Orthodox, but we must do so respectfully. That means lowering the temperature of the polemical rhetoric, acknowledging that they are valid groupings, and, indeed, in granting that if they are sincere in their convictions they possess spiritual dignity."

What do you mean by "valid groupings"? That they are to be dealt with like leaders of secular Jewish groups, such as B'nai B'rith or Jewish War Veterans? I hardly believe that this would pacify the Conservative and Reform leadership. Do you mean, then, that they constitute a group that is valid within Torah Judaism? But you yourself spoke out against pluralism, stating clearly that they lack religious legitimacy<sup>3</sup>. So what do you mean by "valid groupings"? And in what way do "right wingers" view them differently? One might surmise that, in spite of your convic-

3. "I have no choice but to judge legitimacy by my own understanding of what constitutes Judaism and what does not. The criterion of such legitimacy is the Jewish law—the *halacha*; not a specific interpretation of an individual *halacha*; not a general tendency to be strict or lenient; but the fundamental acceptance of *halacha*'s divine origin, of Torah *min hashamayim*."—From an address delivered at CLAL conference on March 19, 1986, quoted in *Moment Magazine*, June 1986.

## What do you mean when you describe the non-Orthodox as "valid groupings"?

abashedly Zionist and values tolerance of different opinions." Since you chose to define your camp by contrasting it to the so-called "right wing," these three points are meant to be key areas where the two groups do not share common ground.

I can only hope that the readers of the *Times* article, and the members of your audience, understand that while we "right wingers" do not embrace Western culture, neither do we ignore it in the manner of no-nothings and country bumpkins. Were that the case, we could not be setting the agenda in so many areas. The fact is that "right wing" Jewry occupies a very definite place in Western World. On the other hand, it would be important to

clarify how the "centrists" square the "unequivocal centrality of Torah" with a good many aspects of Yeshiva University's academic programs. This topic, however, requires broader discussion. Equally, clarification is needed in regard to your "unabashed" identification with Zionism and its relation with Torah. Our position on Zionism has been explained on numerous occasion in the pages of this journal, as well as in other public forums. While our love for Eretz Yisroel and our concern for its security and welfare are boundless, we cannot accept Zionism's redefinition of Am Yisroel, replacing Torah at its core with a nationalism that makes religion a private matter.



## What is the "spiritual dignity" that you confer on Conservative and Reform Judaism?

tions, you have reasons for wanting to maintain positive and official relationships with the Reform and Conservative movement and leadership: so you resort to silken diplomatic terminologies. But must you trumpet your tolerance at the expense of the "right-wing," when your attitude, we are sure, actually conforms with the *halachic* requirement of rejection of *de'os kozvos* (false ideologies)?

Similarly, you grant the non-Orthodox "spiritual dignity." Would that mean that one is permitted to pray in a Conservative congregation without a *mechitza* on Rosh Hashana? Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (*Rosh Hayeshiva* of RIETS and mentor of Modern Orthodoxy), for one, has ruled otherwise<sup>4</sup>. I cannot believe that you would differ with Rabbi Soloveitchik on so basic an issue. Nor would you recognize the legitimacy of a conversion performed by a rabbi who does not have full allegiance to *halacha*, let alone one of the majority of Reform rabbis who officiate at inter-marriages.

So what is the "spiritual dignity" that you confer on Conservative and Reform Judaism? The same dignity that you would accord the devotions of a Jesuit priest, or to a Tibetan monk's search for nirvana on a Himalayan mountain top? If that's all you meant, and no more, would Wolfe Kelman, executive vice-presi-

dent of the [Conservative] Rabbinical Assembly, still say, as was quoted in *The New York Times*, "The Centrist Orthodox have not been our problem"? I believe not. And I gravely doubt that Alexander Schindler, president of the Union of American Hebrew [Reform] Congregations, would still have written to you, on the morrow of the *Times* article: "This is the kind of voice that I and many others have been longing to hear. You express the kind of Orthodoxy that I was taught to revere." (Quoted in JTA, March 28, 1988.)

### HOW DO WE DIFFER?

So now we are faced with the same question as before: If you are conferring a spiritual dignity that is removed from legitimacy, how is that different from the love and concern that the Torah Jew—the "right wing, ultra-Orthodox Jew," if you will—has for every other Jew, regardless of denominational stripe? The obligation to love

others is especially urgent today, when the overwhelming majority of our non-observant brethren are in the category of *tnokos shenishbu*, those who unfortunately never benefitted from a Torah awareness. Almost every yeshiva within the so-called right has a major commitment to *ktiv* work—Beth Medrash Govoha's Shalom Torah Centers and Agudath Israel's JEP and Chizuk programs sponsored by Lubavitch, Belz, and Bobov—both the Lithuanian-American and the Chassidic yeshivos devote significant financial and human resources to outreach. Every Jew counts. And we deeply care about their estrangement.

So, if your view is identical with that of the right wing, why do you phrase it in such way as to lead the members of today's confused generation, who desperately need guidance and not obfuscation, to believe that you are embracing spiritual leaders that are actually leading American Jewry into the abyss of a religion with an absentee god<sup>5</sup>, guided by a Torah authored by mortals—led by "rabbis" who perform second marriages without benefit of a *get* (halachic divorce), irreparably splitting off the principles' offspring from *Klal Yisrael*? While you say that "Reform long ago abandoned *halacha*" you describe "the Conservatives... [as having] sometimes tampered with it outside the confines of Jewish law," as if the Conservatives are only guilty of relatively minor infractions. Their permitting a *koheln* to marry a *grusha* (divorcee), for example, or advocating driving to *shul* on *Shabbos*, for another, is in direct violation of Torah law, which means that they reject the entire *halachic* process. Yet your description makes this

4. "I do hereby reiterate the statement I have made on numerous occasions, both in writing and orally, that a synagogue with a mixed seating arrangement not only forfeits its sanctity and its Halachic status of Mikdash M'at, but also becomes a vulgarized institution which is unfit for prayer and a *cedah sheblev*. With full cognizance of the implications of such a Halachic decision, I would still advise every Orthodox Jew to forego Tilla B. Barber even on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur rather than enter a synagogue with mixed pews, notwithstanding the fact that the officiating Rabbi happens to be a graduate of a great and venerable Yeshiva."—From a letter from Rabbi Y.D. Soloveitchik to the members of the Rabbinical Council of America, July '55.

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#### THEME:

"Centrist Orthodoxy:  
Agenda and Vision,  
Successes and Failures."



SPEAKER:  
Rabbi  
Dr. Norman Lamm,  
President,  
Yeshiva University

DATE:  
Tuesday,  
March 22, 1988  
at 8:00 P.M.

THE PUBLIC IS INVITED  
ADMISSION FREE

5. According to a recent study, more than 20% of the Reform rabbis in America do not believe in a personal G-d. The Conservatives, whose approach until recently was undefined, have just published a tract on their beliefs: *Emet Ve-Emunah*. While the paper says that belief in G-d is essential, it also proclaims that "we have the right to challenge the existence of G-d," to question whether G-d cares about us, whether G-d hears our prayers and, in light of the Nazi Holocaust, why G-d permits such suffering and tragedy. ... So much for Conservative *Emet Ve-Emunah*.



fatal flaw seem insignificant!<sup>6</sup>

As a term to describe Reform and Conservative, "spiritual dignity" goes far beyond "lowering the temperature of polemical rhetoric." It implies granting rabbinic legitimacy to those who brazenly falsify Torah and present their approaches as legitimate alternatives. Why should you even appear to be playing their game?

### WHO IS A CONVERT?

**A**nd then there is your renunciation of the "right-wing" stance on the "Who is a Jew?" issue. The Times article says that you "hoped that [their] legislation ... [which] would recognize only Orthodox conversions for those wishing to enter ... [Israel] as Jews ... does not come up again." Is it your view that this vexing issue should be decided by recognizing Conservative and Reform conversions in Israel? Or is it your opinion, rather, that it is politically unwise

when and how the issue should be raised, as a matter of strategy, not substance. Why not speak up clearly, that on the substantive issue, you too are against religious pluralism in Israel?

### REJOICING WITH TREPIDATION

**A**s to our triumphalism, we are fiercely proud of the hundreds of yeshivos and Bais Yaakov Schools that have sprung up throughout our communities. We are fiercely proud that our children have a devotion—yes, an exclusive devotion to Torah study. We are choked with tears when we see hundreds and thousands of our daughters taking early dawn buses to the nursing homes to minister to our sick. Our joy knows no bounds when we watch the outpouring of tens of thousands of Jews from batei midrashim on Shabbos and Yom Tov. We stand erect when we see that from tens of thousands of families, we have lost almost

remains to be done. Our pride, such as it is, grows from being given the opportunity to serve the Divine purpose, as much as it stems from witnessing our efforts bear fruit. But we are fully cognizant at the same time that we have desperately little time left before millions of Jews will no longer understand what it means to be a Jew and will no longer consider themselves Jews. We cannot permit the tragic loss of so many precious *neshamos*, and the pain of this realization goads us on to further action.

We continue to operate under the belief demonstrated by our *Rabbeim* and *Roshai Yeshiva*: Torah practiced with integrity and conviction need not be diluted to win over others. In fact, it must not be misrepresented, for then the gains are not gains, but losses.

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Dr. Lamm, your lecture on March 22 was most disturbing. In the guise of a call for moderation, you in effect misled the broad public in regard to the Torah view on basic issues, and you maligned the "Ultra-Orthodox" camp in the process. You skillfully issued your plea for "centrist" assertiveness by espousing a diplomatic and humanistic position. But soft and mellow phrases do not answer tough questions nor do they clarify gut issues. That lonely task has been left to the Orthodox right. At this juncture, Torah Jewry has the right to ask that as president of the Rabbi Isaac Elchonon Theological Seminary and spokesman for "Centrist Orthodoxy," you make the positions you espouse unequivocal and clear. The public has the right to know that behind the silk language of diplomacy lies acceptance of the harsh reality that *halacha* confers no rabbinic status whatsoever on Conservative and Reform rabbis. And the bottom line for that determination is *halacha*. ... Dr. Lamm, are you there with us?

Yours truly,  
Aaron Twerski

## The public has the right to know that behind the silk language of diplomacy lies your acceptance of the fact that *halacha* confers no rabbinic status whatsoever on Conservative and Reform rabbis.

to raise the matter repeatedly in Israel? I hardly believe the former—although the uninitiate will surely understand your statement just that way. And if you are only commenting on the ill-timing of the campaign, then you must be aware of the considerable controversy within the rightist camps as to

nothing to attrition. We rejoice at the homes that are closed to infiltration by the smut of television and the degradation of what passes for modern literature or cultural offerings on stage and screen. And we take courage from the realization that the Torah camp has developed articulate voices and an active, responsible arm that is effectively extending its reach, day by day, in the seats of government and the pockets of need across the map.

But this does not add up to a triumphant pride that rides high on the waves of success. We are painfully aware of our shortcomings and we are overwhelmed by what

6. "One cannot be selective with regards to the *halacha*, and to say: 'This part pleases me, and the other does not; lighting candles I will accept, but not the laws of purity of the family.' Either one believes in Torah Min Hashamayim or one does not believe in this basic principle, and rejects it entirely. *Halacha*, to be accepted only in part, is impossible."—From a Responsum by Rabbi Y.D. Solovitchik published in the *Targum Journal* on November 19, 1954.