

NORMAN LAMM

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As outgoing head of Yeshiva University, the seminary that ordains the vast majority of modern Orthodox rabbis, Rabbi Lamm has had a huge influence on the leadership of traditional Judaism. He has authored several books, including his two-volume *Seventy Faces: Articles of Faith*.

"My mother's father, and his ancestors before him, for generations and generations, were rabbanim, rabbis, and it never occurred to me to exclude the rabbinate from my future."

As a young man, I struggled with my choice of career. Was it to be chemistry or the rabbinate? Psychiatry or the rabbinate? Law or the rabbinate? Cartooning or the rabbinate? The only constant in all my deliberations was the rabbinate.

Indeed, the rabbinate was on my blood—or perhaps in my genes. My mother's father, and his ancestors before him, for generations and generations, were *rabbanim*, rabbis, and it never occurred to me to exclude the rabbinate from my future. But more than genetics, it was intellectually attractive and theologically necessary. My life was drawn to Torah, even though other disciplines beckoned as well. I knew all the disadvantages of this particular calling from witnessing my grandfather, my uncle, and my great-uncle, rabbis all. But whatever drawbacks I perceived were easily outweighed by the nobility of life as a *rav* and the opportunity to study Torah and apply it to life.

So it was that I spent twenty-five years as a pulpit rabbi, and I am now in my twenty-sixth year as president of Yeshiva University. Despite Yeshiva's strong "secular" schools and programs—both undergraduate and graduate—being part of the university meant I had a large and complex "congregation" composed of believers and unbelievers, Jews and Gentiles, Orthodox and non-Orthodox. To a large extent, I transferred the skills I learned as pulpit rabbi to my responsibilities at Yeshiva University. Of course, there were many other challenges that I had to master and many more skills to learn—and perhaps some things to unlearn, as well—but I was able to practice on a much larger scale the art of being a "people person," how to communicate effectively and "sell" ideas and educational opportunities.

In the earliest years of my rabbinate, in Springfield, Mass., I learned a great deal from the people I worked with. For a New Yorker, "out of town" meant anyplace west of the Hudson River, and it took a great deal of adjustment to grow comfortable in my new position. I recall the first encounter I had with a Jew who really knew almost nothing about Judaism or rabbis. I was introduced to this estimable gentleman as the new Orthodox

rabbi in town. His immediate reaction was, "You're Orthodox—and so young?" My reply was, "Sir, Orthodoxy is not a gerontological disease."

Much has happened since then. Rabbis, even traditional ones, were acculturated, and young rabbis appeared on the scene—many of whom accomplished worlds. Much more needs to be done to heal the communal sicknesses that plague us and seem unredeemable, even fatal—to all except *real* rabbis who never give up, who are reconciled to Herculean efforts, even if they yield only modest results. The effort itself is ennobling and makes all the difficulties of genuine spiritual leadership worth all the frustrations and disappointments that seem indigenous to the profession. Why? Because the rabbinate is not solely a "profession"; it is, much more accurately, a "calling," a vision, a destiny.

It was, and is, all worthwhile.