

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

Recollections And Reconsideration: Revisiting the Path of Rabbi Norman Lamm

By: Yoni Lipshitz

Posted: 12/17/07

To commemorate and reflect upon a legacy that included 27 years as YU's President, many authored works and countless lectures and sermons, The Commentator sat down with University Chancellor Norman Lamm. In the following are a series of questions and responses, Rabbi Lamm graciously took the time to reconsider various positions and turns taken over the course of his career.

The Commentator: Still serving as Rosh HaYeshiva of RIETS but with a heavy background academia administration and as an administrator, how do you perceive your relationship with the other Roshei Kollel and Roshei Yeshiva?

Norman Lamm: I have very good relations with them. Most of them were appointed by me. There are very few left who were appointed by my predecessor. I know them, I respect them, we don't have to agree on everything but any two intelligent people will find things to disagree upon.

TC: How exactly does the decision making process work in terms determining policy for the Yeshiva? What type of synthesis is there between you and the other Roshei Yeshiva in that area?

NL: I established this policy a long time ago. If a student asks an individual Rosh Yeshiva about his own life or that of the students in his shiur, the Rosh Ha-Yeshiva is authorized to speak. But if they ask about policy for the entire Yeshiva, only I am authorized to speak, no one else. In terms of decision making it's a little more complicated now because there is also a President. Anything that deals with halakhic policy goes through me. Do I consult others? Do I listen to other peoples' opinions? Of course! Do I obey them? Not necessarily. When it comes to policy for the entire Yeshiva, however, it has to go not only through me, but also through President Joel.

TC: Several of the RIETS Roshei Yeshiva have spoken disparagingly toward the philosophy of Torah u-Madda. When has a RIETS-MYP Rosh Yeshiva gone too far when they speak against the broader ideology of the university and the Yeshiva?

NL: As far as I know, none of them do that. They may have different opinions about applying Torah u-Madda: Torah u-Madda should be limited to this or that. But the basic concept of Torah u-Madda, as far as I can tell, is pretty universal. The overwhelming majority of Roshei Yeshiva are college graduates. So if they are against Torah u-Madda, they're falsifying their own past.

TC: Do you think a Rosh Yeshiva who has a philosophy which may more closely resemble the Torah u-Parnasah ideology as opposed to the specific Torah u-Madda ideology? Could such an ideology work in concert with Yeshiva's premier ideology?

NL: In almost every Yeshiva, the Rosh HaYeshiva lays out a line and says anyone who departs from it is out. We don't do that. We outline more of an area within which we would like the opinions of our Roshei Yeshiva to reside. In this structure there is room for individual opinions. However, there are

limits to the right and to the left. If someone says, I'm teaching in the Yeshiva but I think we should have a party on Shabbat involving hillul shabbat, obviously we're not going to stand for that. Or, on the other hand, if a person says that learning anything in college in any way is completely against his values, he has no business coming here. Within our very broad AREA there can be differences of opinion. Regarding Torah u-Parnassah, I think that Torah u-Parnasah is not a theology, it's not a principle, it's not an ideology. It's merely an excuse. I try not to deal with excuses. I prefer to deal with ideas.

TC: Ideally every student would be able to flourish and thrive in both Torah and secular studies. You have written about this as an ideal form of education. Upon reflection, do you still feel that this is that every student, whether they be in YC, Sy Syms, or Stern College, strives for? Or is Torah u-Madda in its purist form reserved for the intellectual elite?

NL: I would like to think that our students are aspiring to be intellectually elite. We have a double curriculum, Judaic Studies and General Studies. That's twice as much as Harvard, Princeton or Yale. It's a very tough program. Some of our students do manage to get by very poorly in either one or the other, or even both. They're not the intellectual elite. But, every student should aspire to Torah u-Madda. Not every student can manage it, so some will be stronger in one Torah some will be stronger in secular studies. As long as you are studying both, and you feel that both express the will of God, you're part of the consensus.

The most elite of the elite will be strong on both sides and thus be qualified to develop the idea for the next generation. But, everyone should at least have some taste of it and be aware of it and consent to it in principle. If you can't handle both it doesn't mean you're stupid, but then you have a personal decision to make. If a person has a stronger desire for Torah he'll sacrifice a bit of his secular studies, and spend more time learning Torah. If one has to have more sciences because he plans to go into the medical profession, or a similar situation, that person may decide that while he certainly has to learn Torah as well, he will spend more time concentrating on secular studies. So the ideal, in general, is for everybody. But the full program of Torah u-Madda is, by the nature of its demands upon the student's time and attention, reserved for the intellectual elite or those who aspire to it.

TC: Do you feel that president Joel is continuing to move YU toward similar or the same goals as you had for YU as you had during your presidency? Or are your visions for YU entirely different from one another?

NL: They are entirely alike. I talked with him about it before he became president, and much more since he became president, and I have full confidence that he is leading YU in the same direction that I wanted it to be led all along. I am very pleased by it.

TC: More specifically what are your impressions of the progress of the Center for the Jewish Future?

NL: From what I see I think they're doing some marvelous work. It's not for everybody. But, there is something of value in it for almost everybody. One very good thing they're doing is enhancing our outreach efforts. Another thing they're doing are these trips to Guatemala and similar places. Not everybody has the desire to go to Guatemala or Thailand, but others do. I think it's a tremendous opportunity. We have people going to Guatemala and building a school from scratch for people who never saw a Jew in their lives. That's important for two reasons. First, it's a tremendous Kiddush Hashem. The second reason is that it's good for the people who are doing it. At Yeshiva we have such a difficult dual program, that in spite of the fact that students are intellectually alert, they tend to be socially and culturally quite narrow. It has to be that way. If a person doesn't spend time in a narrow and intense environment, then he'll have nothing to say later. But it's important for students to see first hand that there is a world "out there." It's important for them to understand that not everyone is intellectual.

Not everyone is Jewish. Not everyone is decent and moral. You have people who have a totally different culture, but each one of them was created in the image of God. People come back from this experience and they are changed for the better. They are more enthusiastic and more fulfilled because they are doing things that are important from the Jewish point of view.

TC: You have historically been an outspoken proponent of increased unity and respect between all denominations of Jews whether they are Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or any other denomination. Do you feel the Orthodox community is succeeding in this area in the way you had hoped?

NL: Not very much. People don't understand that if I treat a person with respect, it doesn't necessarily mean I approve of what he or she is saying. When I was in the rabbinate, when I was much younger, I used to pound the pulpit and storm against Conservative and Reform and secular ideas and practices. In retrospect I think it may have been the wrong approach. Was I really convincing anybody? I don't think so. Those who were supportive of those movements mostly remained supportive and those who were against them remained against them.

Looking back, some people were probably insulted by what I said, even though they may have agreed with my point of view, but as liberal thinking American Jews for whom "manners" and "fairness" were equally important to the Orthodox view and they may have decided not to come to shul again. The only thing that happened as a result of all these anti-conservative/ reform/secular groups is that we have less people davening. I found that you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar.

Another reason I don't speak out against Conservative Judaism is because as Woodrow Wilson said "Never murder a man who is committing suicide." And the Conservative movement is disappearing. It's unfortunate because their disappearance doesn't mean they're coming to YU and going to Orthodox synagogues. If the movement closes down, any good influence they did have, be it through camp Ramah or through convincing people not to marry out of the faith, will be lost entirely. I like the idea of having Conservative day schools and Reform day schools. People are afraid these things will attract the Orthodox. Maybe they will attract the very weakest of our people, but that's it. It will assure that when it comes time to do outreach, there will at least be something left to whom we can reach out.

Another reason I no longer find it worthwhile to attack them is because we live in a society which is open and is very much "turned off" by narrowness, and if we attack those with whom we disagree, we lose our appeal to these people as well as to others standing on the side lines. If we want to win people over to Orthodoxy, we need to present ourselves as measured, mature, and moderate people with deep faith and the right practice, but we do not insult others and we do not damage or condemn them. Coming out with issurim against everyone else is like another Fatwa. When I was younger there was a heretic by the name of Mordecai Kaplan (the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism), and the Agudas HaRabbonim had this whole big book burning party. I thought it was ridiculous to have a book burning in the twentieth century. It didn't make anybody decide to become more religiously observant. Nobody who was reading his books said "If important Orthodox rabbis burned them, we're not going to read them." If anything, it aroused interest in people who otherwise would not have wanted to read these books. But in addition, what it accomplished was that it got people to look at the Orthodox as fanatics. That's no way to make friends and win people over to Orthodoxy.

TC: What are some other important areas in which you feel that the Orthodox community could stand to improve?

NL: We used to be more successful in outreach in the days when Abe Stern was in charge of youth services. He did some very good work, which was overlooked by some of our critics when they write up the history of outreach, and they don't even mention that we (the Modern Orthodox) were "the first kids on the block." We're failing in the constant battling and bickering amongst Orthodox Jews, which is only

• one aspect of what is happening all over the Jewish community, especially in Israel. The right hates the left. The religious hate the seculars. The seculars hate the religious. The religious have factions which hate each other. Everyone hates everyone else. In that regard, Orthodoxy has failed, and it unfortunately shows no signs right now of letting up. The dividing lines between right, left, and middle within Orthodoxy are getting firmer and firmer. The respective parties are only becoming more outspoken against one another, and it's not healthy at all.

© Copyright 2007 The Commentator