

SPEECH BY RABBI NORMAN LAMM

BANQUET: SUMMER SESSION
EASTERN SEMINAR 1968

It is very hard not to sound a bit over-sentimental and saccharine at a time of this sort. It is rather sad to close shop and call an end to our Seminar of 1968.

These seven or eight days that we have been together at Camp Morasha have been a highly concentrated period, equivalent to a much longer time. We have gotten to know each other quite intensely. We have experienced much more in this week than people ordinarily do in weeks or even months. To an extent, this period may form a significant portion of our lives. I am fairly sure that there are people in this dining room tonight for whom this week represents a turning point in their lives. Something very decisive has happened to them. Henceforth their careers, their futures, their destinies, are going to be much different from what they would have been had they not been here today. So this evening is like the end of a chumash. When you end one book of the Bible and begin the next, there are three words that the congregation recites while rising: "Chazak, chazak, ve'nit'chazek -- Be strong, be strong, and let us find strength in each other." Chazak implies the strength of courage. That is going to be my theme for this evening -- the theme of courage, specifically three kinds of courage.

The first form of courage that I recommend to you is the courage to grow up fast. There is no time to squander on leisurely

childishness in the world we live in. Socially, militarily, politically, and especially Jewishly, the stream of events flows too quickly to allow time for "kid stuff" for people your age. Our world is hungry for adult minds. Nature does not share our human predilection for coddling people until they are eighteen or twenty. If the youngest of you here were a bird, by this age your mother would long ago have shoved you out of her nest and you would be on your own. If you were a member of any other species, nature would not tolerate that gap in age that we humans have invented and called "adolescence" or "teens," a period which seems to combine a maximum of opportunity with a minimum of responsibility. In Halakhah, in Jewish law, once you have become Bar Mitzvah you are considered gadol. This means many things. It means "majority." It means "big." It also means "great." You are expected to strive for greatness. There is no longer any excuse for being a katan, a minor, a baby. A person who is immature is, in Halakhah, equivalent to a shoteh, to a fool, and we have no time for that. It means that you have to strike out on your own. At this point in your lives you must be formulating your own destiny, asking your own questions, searching out life's meaning and purpose on your own.

I grant that it is much easier to remain infantile. It is much more convenient and comfortable and pleasurable to wallow in an eternal adolescence -- there are some people who are adolescents until they are eighty or ninety. But in our world we cannot afford

that luxury. We need your strength desperately. We can't wait. Each and every single individual here has got to have courage, and guts -- the guts and the courage, the chazak, to become a gadol, to grow up fast, to start asking adult questions and searching for adult answers.

Second, all of us have got to have another kind of courage: the courage to care. Simply: to care. This coming Sabbath, only two or three days hence, we are going to read about the laws of homicide, specifically, a person who kills unwittingly. As we read the introduction of these laws, the Torah tells us that this is the law of the murderer, "asher yakkeh et re'ehu be've'li daat (Deut. 19:4). This is the law of the murderer who would "strike his friend without knowledge." What that actually means is that one person murders another without malice, without forethought, or intention. But I think that the Torah meant something else too. It is possible for one person to murder another without lifting his hand, without pulling a trigger. It is possible to kill with the most lethal weapon of all - be'li daat, "without knowledge," by not caring. You can spill blood because you don't know who your friend is, because you don't want to know, you don't care, you are not concerned with him. And when you do not put your mind to another human being, you sometimes kill him. There are some people who wait for a smile: and when you deny them a smile, that simple show of human compassion, you murder them just a little bit at a time. There are some people who wait for a compliment, for a kind word. You do not

mean to be bad, but if you are the kind of person who cannot imagine himself in someone else's situation, you are a makkeh et re'ehu bi've'li daat. It is much easier to be withdrawn. It is much easier to keep only yourself in mind. It takes courage to care about someone else. But without that courage we are all brutalized. Don't forget that we Jews suffered the loss of one-third of our people during World War II. Their blood is not only upon the Nazis and the Ukrainians and the Lithuanians. It is also upon the great countries of the West, the so-called "free world," which, towards us, was a makkeh et re'ehu bi've'li daat. The democracies ignored us; they didn't lift a finger against us, but they didn't lift a finger for us. You can kill by not caring and by not being concerned. Our country today is paying the price of unconcern and lack of care for the Negro and for our poor. We are today in the midst of a revolution, right or wrong, going to extremes or not going to extremes. We asked for it, because for all these years we didn't care enough.

There is a marvelous passage in the Talmud which speaks about caring and about the excuse of "not knowing." It tells us that there was once a man who entrusted some jewels to a friend. When he came back, he said to his friend, "Give me back my jewels." But the man shrugged his shoulders and said, lo vadana, "I don't know where I put them." The first man was furious. His whole life savings were in those jewels. So he brought the case to court, before the great Rabbi Nachman. Rabbi Nachman studied the problem,

and then he offered his decision: kol lo yadana peshiuta hi, zil shelim. The answer or excuse, "I don't know," is criminal. Go and pay.

The same holds true in our human relations. When you hear the cry of a neighbor, the hurt of a neighbor, the wounded feeling of a neighbor, and you say to yourself, "I didn't know about him" -- that is not an excuse. You've got to know, you must care, you are obligated to have compassion, it is your duty to be involved. You dare not be detached, because if you are going to take the attitude that "it's none of my business," you are in trouble; zil shelim, you will have to pay for it, sooner or later.

My dear friends of the '68 Seminar: in these last eight days we have entrusted to you certain jewels, and we are going to demand (or better, not we but God is going to demand) that you give an accounting of what you have done with them. Look at the jewels we have given you that you may not have known of before, at least not in quite the same way. We have given you something of Shabbat; we have shared with you something of the holidays; we have told you more than you knew before about candlelighting and tefillin, and tzitzit and kashrut; we have introduced you to the moral codes of Judaism; we've talked together about the "chosen people." We have emphasized the importance of the State of Israel. We have tried to emphasize the beauty, the glory, the difficulties, and the intellectual stimulation of Talmud Torah. These are your jewels. Never

again will any of you be able to claim before God: "Lo yadana,"

I never heard of them, I don't know. Now you know -- and now you have the responsibility and the obligation and the sacred duty to know more and to do something about it.

In addition, you have opportunities not known to generations before you. Use them, don't ignore them.

We live in a democracy. There is no one who forces us to study atheism and curbs us from studying Yiddishkeit, as happens behind the Iron Curtain. We have books, we live in a rich country, The poorest of us is rich compared to most of the world. We have the opportunity to study, even those of us who are isolated. If you can read and can obtain a magazine, you have the opportunity to study.

Furthermore, you have an opportunity that I in my generation did not. You live in an age of youthful assertiveness, when young people have begun to take over and make their voices heard, and when adults -- whether they like it or not, and they usually do not -- have to listen to you. So you have something in your favor before you begin, and you must do something with it.

Do you know what it means to have these opportunities? About seven or eight years ago I went for a month to India, to visit the Jewish community there. The most moving incident that happened to me took place my first night there. I spoke in a what they call a "prayer hall," a tiny little synagogue on the fifth floor of a delapidated tenement house. You have never seen anything like it in

your lives. No one in the worst slums of Harlem lives in these kind of surroundings -- a depressing neighborhood in Bombay, a depressing city in a depressing country. You walk upstairs and you see the whole history of India before your eyes, all the tragedy. The house was electrified, with one 10-watt bulb per floor, and with four families living in two rooms, without tables or chairs. This was an introduction to human misery, anguish, and poverty. When I left, after this talk, I was followed by a group of Bene Israels, the indigenous Jews, typical Indian-looking young boys and girls your age. Their English was a bit halting. The boys were wearing each an open shirt -- I felt sure it was the only shirt each of them owned. The girls in their saris, probably their only decent saris, walked with me into the courtyard, all of them barefoot, where we saw people sleeping, because they don't have a roof over their heads. Finally one of them, who was apparently the president of the group, said to me "Rabbi, we want to ask you for something." I could not imagine what he was going to ask me for. Medicine, shoes, shirts? I would have been ready to promise him anything. I was ready to write a check, mail it to New York, and have them send whatever it was these young people requested, all at my expense. I said, "What can I do for you?" He answered, "Rabbi, we want Jewish books." That's all they wanted. They didn't have enough food, they didn't own a pair of shoes. But they wanted a Jewish book.

Well, we have it. We have the books, we have the people, we have the opportunity, we have the freedom. We have jewels. What are you going to do with all of this? Are you going to squander it and say Lo yadana, or are you going to use it?

In a sense, I think all my colleagues and your advisors ought to plead guilty. We are somewhat at fault for introducing you to this kind of life. Had we not introduced you to it, you would have had a legitimate excuse: you never heard of such things. You never saw it from the inside. We are responsible for having acquainted you with something on which you can no longer turn your backs with impunity. You are involved. You have been introduced to Torah, even though to a very minor extent. But our reason for doing so is that we too have been entrusted certain objects. All of us around the table are trustees. God has given us certain jewels. Do you know what they are? You! For eight days we have been made trustees of your personalities, talents, wit, will, chutzpah, strength, persistence, stubbornness. These are jewels, and they were entrusted to us, and we have to answer for them.

We esteem these jewels of personality more than you can imagine. Many of you come here with the attitude that you are taking from us, that you are picking our brains, and that we are paying attention to you, giving everything to you while you are giving nothing to us. Let me tell you that that is not so. In every great human relationship, whether it be love or friendship or companionship,

you can't take without giving and you can't give without taking. If we have given you something, I want to tell you -- especially those who come from backgrounds where all this is slightly strange to you -- that you have given so very much to us, to your instructors and to those Seminararians who come from a full Jewish background. Do you know what you have given us? Sometimes we fall prey to the feeling that maybe we Orthodox Jews are not making progress in the world. We feel discouraged: a dwindling minority, with very little sales values for that which we cherish. Sometimes we wonder: maybe something is wrong with us? But when we see you, intelligent high school and college students, coming to us with your relish and your enthusiasm, you encourage us and your classmates and bunkmates who do come from intensive Jewish backgrounds. You tell them something. You bring a certain zeal, a certain ruach that we lack, because we have never had to fight for that for which you have to struggle. So you are giving something extremely valuable to us, and we thank you for it. We admire you for it. May God bless you for it.

So, let me then ask you to do that one thing: chazak. Have the courage and the strength of character to care and to be concerned with Yiddishkeit, with Jews, with Israel, and with all human beings.

Finally: third and most important, nit'chazek. Let us strengthen ourselves. Let us have the courage to go it alone, the courage to be lonely. Here I address myself again specifically to those Seminararians who face special problems because of their interest in Torah and in Judaism.

Some of you are going to return to your communities where you will no doubt experience a sense of isolation from the society in which you moved until now. You will feel a sense of solitude in your schools, where you may be looked upon askance for your "crazy" notions, for your "meshugenne" observances. Not only friends, but even your families are going to whisper to each other that maybe there is something wrong with you. Under such pressure, both direct and subtle, you may well feel discouraged. But I ask you to remember that the career of the Jew, from the very beginning, from Abraham himself, was a career of going it alone. Abraham was called Ivri, "the Hebrew." The Rabbis said that Ivri comes from the word Ever, the one who lives on the other side, the "green-horn," the alien-outsider. Abraham was known as ivri because Avraham me'ever zeh ve'khol ha-olam me'ever zeh, he was able to abide by his opinions and his convictions even if he was alone against the entire world. This has always been the mark of the Jew. Abraham's very first commandment was lekh lekha -- get away from your country and your birthplace, even from your father's house. You have to live a new kind of life.

That is why we are called in the Bible a goy kadosh, Holy Nation. We are a separate people, whether we like it or not, and we ought to like it. We are am levadad yishkon, a people that dwells by itself. You know the greatness of the Jew? Look at Mordecai. Mordecai started the whole Purim episode when, all alone, lo yikhra ve'lo yishtachaveh, he refused to kneel and he refused to bow. A

Jew does not kneel to pressure, a Jew does not bow to conformity, a Jew does not bend the knee to the idolatries of the day, whether those of youth or of old age, for they are equally abominations. Of course, this has caused ridicule and even hatred and anti-Semitism. Because of Mordecai's stubborn differentness Haman was able to say, "These Jews are different," datehem shonot mi-kol am. Because of our differences, this very day, the Russians, the East Germans, and the Poles accuse "Zionists" for fomenting the Czechoslovak Liberal Communist Revolution. To my knowledge, today's Czechoslovakian Jews are not the greatest Zionists, but that makes no difference. The Jew is different, whether or not he wants to be known as different. And our loneliness is part of our whole mission.

Of course, you can resolve right now that you are going to go back to your homes, to your families and to your schools, and you are going to live the kind of life that you learned about here, proud that you are non-conformist. But when your friends get into a discussion with you, do you know what they will probably say to you? "You're not a non-conformist at all. You are very much the conformist. You are hewing to an old tradition that's outdated, You're conforming to an ancient pattern. You are the one that's conforming!"

Let me suggest to you what to answer them. This story was told to me by Herman Wouk. One summer, about fifteen years ago, he was going to Italy by ship. Upon signing the registry of passengers,

he noticed that near the top of the list was the name of Sholom Ash, the great Yiddish writer, much of whose work has been translated into English. Ash was strongly pro-Christian, and over fifty years ago in Warsaw he came out against circumcision as "barbaric." After Mr. Wouk settled in his room, a bellhop came with a message from Sholom Ash inviting him to meet with him in his cabin. He went, naturally, in answer to the older man. In the course of the long conversation, Ash said, "Look Herman, I want to ask you something. I hope you don't mind. I don't understand you. I think you're crazy. When I was a young man, we writers were rebels, we were revolutionaries, we had zeal, we had enthusiasm. We took all the old stuff and threw it out. We were going to break out of the confining walls of the ghetto, and a brand new world was going to open up before us. Now here you come, a young fellow, and you start telling us this nonsense about Shabbat and Kashrut. In this day and age to you really intend to conform to that ancient stuff? Are you still conforming to this old mold?" Wouk answered: "Mr. Ash, you allowed yourself to speak freely, permit me to do so too. Mr. Ash, you are a conformist, a Phillistine, because there's no chokhmah, no virtue, no trick, no courage involved in your posture. In our anti-Jewish society, you are simply doing what everyone else does when you violate the Sabbath or defile yourself with treifah. You are not at all a rebel against society, you are an ordinary conformist. In my

circles, where I travel, at Columbia when I was a student, and in Hollywood and Broadway where I now work, I am a rebel, I am a non-conformist, because I refuse to accept the easy norms that society hands me merely because they are 'modern.' You're the conformist and I'm the rebel."

And that, my friends, is the answer you ought to give to your friends when you return home.

For a young person today, especially for those of you who come from smaller communities and suburbs, to be able to remain traditional and loyal to Torah is a mark of indomitable courage.

Nothing is easy in Yiddishkeit. Most things are difficult. One of the great sages of our generation, the "Chazon Ish" of blessed memory, once said: "Everything is hard. I really have not found anything easy" in Judaism -- and he was not referring merely to the inconvenience of certain practices. Everything is difficult, and everything is glorious -- that is the beauty of our faith. You have to have the courage to go alone, the courage of nit'chazek.

When you get back home, the spirit of Seminar will soon begin to wear off, and you will be beset by moments of plaguing loneliness and doubts. You may wonder if perhaps this whole seminar was an injection of "spirit" which wasn't quite real. You may feel that you can't hold out anymore against the odds and you can't bear the burden of loneliness. At such times, think back to

the experience of these last seven or eight days, to the warmth, the friendship, the singing, and the dancing, the lectures and the questions, the walks and the talks. Think back, and maybe nit'chazek, we will give each other strength and help ease the loneliness. One person here or one person there, another person in another place, will correspond and stay in touch and thus bridge the geographical gap and the time gap. Together, just thinking of each other may help us find strength in each other to abolish that solitude. Remember to write to each other and find courage in each other.

One final word about home in regard to your families. Many of you are going to run into problems with your parents. When you do, I want to advise you to deal wisely, and deal beautifully, and deal Jewishly with your parents. Remember: kabed, honor, respect, reverence, and love them, no matter how much you may disagree with them. They bore you, they raised you, they clothed you, they fed you, they educated you, and they sent you here, or at least they didn't object too strongly, and that too is something. Remember that, because it is a principle of our faith. I am not asking you to yield in your opinions, because you are human beings. I am saying, never utter a word of disrespect. Never let Yiddishkeit become an excuse or a disguise for an adolescent rebellion. There must be nothing adolescent about Yiddishkeit.

I return to my first theme: this is an adult business. Do not use Judaism as a club against somebody else, especially against family, and most especially against parents.

Of course it's going to be difficult. I remember hearing a story which I never thought was really true, but now I know it is, and many of you know it from your own backgrounds. A young Jewish boy who was raised in a completely non-observant Jewish home, was sent to his Orthodox grandparents for a visit. He had a marvelous time and for the first time learned of his magnificent and beautiful heritage. When he went home, he tearfully kissed the mezuzah, and said, "Goodbye God, I'm going home now."

Some of you may feel that you're saying goodbye to God because you're going home now. Well, it isn't really that bad: Jews believe that God is everywhere.

Remember one more thing: the word kabed, honor, respect for your parents, is related to the word kaved, which means heavy or weighty. How do you respect your parents? By becoming weightier human beings, greater in courage, more substantial personalities, more dignified (in the sense of inner dignity, inner value) by developing worth, Jewish worth, human worth. Even if your parents object at first, they will ultimately thank you and appreciate it, because every parent wants to be outdone by his children. If you will become kaved in the way that Judaism teaches, you will win their respect; and from this chazak all of us will draw courage.

You, they, and we will together strengthen ourselves, and you will have the courage to overcome the loneliness.

Let me summarize. The theme of courage, chazak, means first to grow up and cut out the "kid stuff." Two, chazak -- you must have the courage to care, not to be indifferent, to work, for you will never be able to stop working at Yiddishkeit. Three, nit'chazek, we must strengthen each other and draw courage from each other to risk being alone, the risk of temporary alienation, that is involved in the career of being a Jew.

We always must operate on the faith and the hope that in the long, long run, all the world, all society, and all civilization will see that our attitudes and our beliefs have been vindicated: ve'ra'u kol amei ha-aretz ki ha-Shem dibber. Even before that, our fellow Jews will come to appreciate and accept what we stand for, because kol Yisrael chaverim, all Jews are brothers and friends to each other. And even earlier, we may hope that our own families will come to see things our way. This has been the great dream of our prophets: He will turn lev banim al avotam. There are some families where parents are loyal to Torah and the children stray. About them we hope that God will, through the prophets, in the day of Messiah, turn the hearts of the children back to their parents. And in those cases where parents strayed but their children have returned, we hope that ve'heshiv lev avot al banim, He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children.

Remember that. Remember at all times that even if one link

in the chain is missing, the great chain swings back and forth. It is the chain of the Jewish tradition -- and not too much is missing. You can still reach out and you can still grasp it and continue it through yourselves into the future.

I hope that we have given you some courage, even as you have given us a great deal of courage. I hope and pray that you go home to your families, to your communities, with peace for every one of you, blessings upon each of you for a good year, a happy year, a year of strength, of courage, a year which you will be firm in your resolve, determined in your loyalty, unshakeable in your faith, and when all of you will become not only great human beings, but also great Jews.