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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW



Hamevaser Interviews RABBI DR. NORMAN LAMM, President of Yeshiva University

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AH: *What do you feel to have been your greatest achievements over the past two decades at Yeshiva University?*

RL: You've asked me what I think my greatest achievements have been since I came to Yeshiva a little over twenty years ago. A number of them: one of them is guiding the university through debt reconstruction when I first came, for the first two or three years, when we were on the brink of bankruptcy, and we had to decide what to do. It was a very difficult time, a very threatening time, but, with the help of the Almighty, we overcame it, and since then we have no debt of any serious consequence.

The second thing is the formation of the Kollelim. When I came here, we had only one Kollel; now we have four Kollelim here and one in Israel; that, to my mind, says something about *harbatzat haTorah*. Also Torah U'Madda – the emphasis on Torah U'Madda, the publications about Torah U'Madda – we have several volumes already, we have a journal on Torah U'Madda, we have lectures on Torah U'Madda. I am now convinced that no matter what we do, students will always complain about the fact that we don't have anyone to talk about Torah

U'Madda, which means that they're not reading and they're not listening, but if they did, they would find that there's quite a bit they can learn from.

I think that the next element would be – I don't know if it's my achievement; maybe it's in the air – the growth of the midtown campus, Stern College and Sy Syms – especially the midtown campus, and the tremendous increase of Jewish learning not only in quantity but in quality, which may even go beyond that. Finally, I would say, the emphasis on academic excellence, which means the Honors programs which are going into effect, *im yirtzeh Hashem*, both at Stern and at Yeshiva College, and I think we increased recognition of Yeshiva University in the world community.

Those, I think, are my contributions. For none of these was I alone personally responsible – and don't think I say it because I want to prove to you my *anivut* – but anything that's important in an institution is always done because of a team effort.

AH: *What have been the most outstanding experiences that HaRav has faced as President of Yeshiva University?*

RL: My most satisfying experiences was in the early years of my presidency – unfortunately, not in my later years – and that was the opportunity that I had to discuss issues of Yeshiva University import, as well as the Jewish community in general, with the Rav, *zikhrono le-verakha*. I had many, many deep conversations. I have never quoted him, because I think that those who quote the Rav generally do him an injustice. Besides, there are so many quotations of the Rav in so many different directions that I am not always sure that what the Rav said was heard by the reporter. So, I prefer not to disseminate anything, not to publicize it, but I did get a great deal of information, guidance and understanding from him during those early years.

AH: *With which school of religious Zionist thought – if any – does HaRav identify himself? Do we ascribe religious significance to the State of Israel, and, if so, in what capacity?*

RL: As a youngster, when I was very young, I was a member of Pirchei Agudas Yisrael. I lived in Williamsburg, and that was the thing to do in those days; it was a very pleasant experience. But as I grew up, I changed, and I began to give *shiurim* during my first year in college to Hashomer HaDati, to which I never formally belonged, and that grew into religious Zionism. But – I identify myself as a religious Zionist with certain modifications. First of all, I am totally uninterested in the political, partisan aspects of the party in Israel. I am very much committed to religious Zionism as a movement, and I am not concerned with it as a political party. I think that Mizrachi, in the early years of the Medinah, made some very significant contributions; without it, there would have been no religious tone to the state whatsoever – it would have been simply a division between the Orthodox and the rest of the world which would have never been bridged. But times have changed. The one thing that never changes is change, and situations have changed –

the political, social, religious and cultural contexts; you cannot fight today's battles with yesterday's weapons. That is one of the undoings of our own *shittah* – we tend to fight enemies who no longer exist or who simply morphed in a completely different kind of entity. So I think that we have to have no more, or almost no more, religious legislation. I think the recent elections proved that the country will not abide and will not tolerate any further interference in their personal freedom. We are facing very serious questions, and we will simply have to meet them one by one, and do it with understanding, neither by throwing in the towel nor by circling around the wagon. It requires judgment. It's very hard to expect such things – people generally are afraid to exercise good judgment; they want to have one answer for all purposes.

I said 'with modifications' because I think my position is known among Yeshiva students. I am not one who says the *tefillah le-sh'lom ha-medinah* with the words *reishit tzemichat ge'ulateinu*. I certainly believe

that it has religious significance – look, I'm a religious Jew, so everything has religious significance;

to say that something does not have religious significance means that there's no *hashgacha, chalilah*. And of course, only if you've lived through the period of the Holocaust, even if you weren't there, can you appreciate the importance of the State of Israel. I was a high-school kid during the time of the Holocaust, but sufficiently aware of what was going on, insofar as anyone in America was aware during this time. It is ludicrous to say that the founding of the state had no religious significance; of course it did. But I question those who say with such certainty that this is the *atchalta d'geulah* and also those who say that it's not. I just say that you have no way of knowing it. The Rashbam, I believe, says that when Moshe Rabbeinu said to *Hakadosh Barukh Hu* "*hodi'eni na et derakhekha*," and he said to him, "*et achorei yir'au v'et panai lo yir'au*," "you can see My back but not My face," it means that you can tell by looking at the past what was God's hand in history; you can't predict it for the future. To say that this is *atchalta d'geulah* or not presumes that there are mortals who can see things from the Divine perspective. I question that.

AH: *Contemporary Jewish thinkers have dealt extensively with the problem of theodicy vis-à-vis the Holocaust. With which approach, if any, does HaRav identify?*

RL: Well, I don't think that the question of theodicy should even arise here; the tragedy was too great, the disaster too incomprehensible, and to look for any meaning in it, I think, is demeaning to the *kedoshim*. I know that all kinds of explanations were given. The Satmarers said, 'because they were Zionists,' the Zionists said 'because we did not come often enough or soon enough.' All these answers, to my mind, are embarrassing, because it is true that we say *mip'nei chata'einu*, but we do not say *mip'nei chata'eihem*, and what all these answers presume is that the other guy is guilty. I don't want to go into great detail. I gave a talk about this at Yeshiva a number of years ago, and published it as "The Face of God," which is really my *shittah* on these things – that I do not look for explana-

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tions, that I do not cast guilt; I believe that it was *hester panim*, and *hester panim*, the hiding of God's face, literally means that He throws us open to the winds of nature and history at one point, never completely abandoning us, and that's why impersonal history took over, and we have to pray for *ha'arat panim*, that the Divine smile will reappear.

AH: *What programs would HaRav like to see implemented to foster unity among religious and secular Jews both here and in Israel?*

RL: Well, clearly I believe that there has to be some contact; I do not accept the point of view that either we are so holy that we can have no contact with everyone else, or that we are winning the battle so triumphantly that we might as well stand by and watch the enemy disappear. I don't regard them as the enemy. I regard every Jew as *acheinu b'nei yisrael* regardless of what they believe and what they say. Dostoevsky once said that a Jew can stand on a rooftop and shout, "there is no God," but the fact that he's a Jew and is saying something means that there is a God in the world. I say the same thing about Jews in

Israel or America: no matter what they say – they can scream bloody murder that they don't want to have anything to do with us – they're still Jewish; they are our brothers, and sisters, and we have a responsibility toward them; we must not by any means compromise our principles, but we must also act with great *derekh erez*, without being patronizing and condescending, and try to do something. My own point, my own belief is that now, at this particular point in history, the most important thing is *talmud torah*, to teach; and to teach means not to teach in my *beit midrash* and expect someone a thousand miles away to hear it, but to go where they are, where Jews are. I don't care where they are – it can be in a Reform seminary, in a college, in an adult-education institute, under non-Orthodox auspices – I don't care where – as long as we get the message across. Chazal said, "*halevai oti azavu v'et torati shamaru, mip'nei shehama'or shebah machziro le-mutav*"; you must have a certain confidence in Torah itself that it will work its beneficial effects

on Jews. So if we want to have unity, it can only be on the basis of Torah – we cannot use Torah as a source of

disunity in Am Yisrael; and if it is to be used as a force for unity, then we've got to teach it, and we can't be particular as to whom we teach it. As to the old *machloket* in Chazal as to whether to teach only one who is *tokho ke-baro* or not – today, if you only taught the people who are *tokho ke-baro*, you wouldn't have many students left. We have to work throughout the *k'lal yisrael*, which is in extreme danger – not militarily, but religiously, culturally, from the point of view of identity – we can't just sit by and say 'we're holier than thou.'

AH: *Does HaRav see a need to mend relations between our community and the 'haredi' community? If so, how can it best be accomplished?*

RL: Right now, the split is a very real one; not in ultimate matters, but only in one matter, and that is the thing I just discussed with you. They are unforgiving in their anger at anyone who extends a hand of peace, or even of teaching. I received a harsh condemnation for teaching people in their own institutional quarters *yichud Hashem, ahavat Hashem, Tefillin, Mezuzah* – if that's the case, I'm willing to accept it. Do I think we have to mend our

relations? I think we have, and I have, personally always held out a hand, and I'm always willing to grasp it, and I'm willing to forget all the insults and all the humiliation, and wipe the slate clean at any point in time if I feel there's a genuine desire in the Haredi community, those parts of the Haredi community that have been antagonistic; I don't think they all have, by any means. There are parts of the Haredi community that have not been antagonistic; they have their own *shittah*, but are very understanding that it is possible to have another *shittah*. Don't forget that having a *machloket* is not exactly strange to Jews; in over 540 *perakim* of Mishnayot, there is only one *perek* in which there is no *machloket* – *Eizehu Mekoman*. So we should be tolerant of other opinions as long as we want to reach the same goal; so I would say that we should always be ready to work in tandem, in cooperation, with the Haredi community at any time they're ready, but not if it requires simply submitting and forgetting our own approach at a time that is so critical.

AH: *How ought our community look upon the spirit of liberalism and moral relativism that seems to have gripped contemporary society? Ought we show our gratitude for the benefits that we reap as a religious minority or must we rail against the moral decadence that it seems to accompany?*

RL: The spirit of liberalism is in many ways an aspect of modernism itself, and we have to confront it and accommodate it to the extent that is Halakhically and strategically permissible. By 'Halakhically permissible,' I mean that if liberalism says that there are no moral standards left, then the devil take liberalism; but if liberalism says that we want people to be autonomous in their thinking, I say yes – Halakhically, that is acceptable, and strategically, which means, for the ultimate benefit of the Torah community and Am Yisrael, it can be accommodated to a certain extent. Where to draw the line is a matter of individual opinion and a question of the individual problem that is being raised. Moral relativism? I am firmly opposed; I have no truck with it. What bothers me about the whole talk about pluralism is that it is a very thin disguise for moral relativism. I think that moral rela-

tivism has been the undoing of many a society, and is probably the greatest threat that American culture faces. When you ask me if we should show a debt of gratitude for the benefits that we reap as a religious minority or rail against the moral decadence, I say there's no Hobson's choice here; I don't say 'either or,' I say 'both and.' I think we should be very grateful for the recognition we have, for the freedom we have as a religious minority, and we should be willing to extend that to other religious minorities. At the same time, I

sessors of *da'as torah*; but you can recognize a *gadol* when you see one. If he has *da'as torah*, that means that his opinions must always be considered; but "considered" does not mean that they have to be accepted dogmatically. We do not have any dogma of infallibility of contemporary scholars, that someone can say 'this is what you must think, this is what you must do.' Because if the opinion is a Halakhic opinion, it is open to debate, and as Rabbi Chayim of Volozhin used to say, even a small spindle of a stick can cause a confla-

gration of a big tree; even a small *talmid*, if he asks a good *kasha*, can overturn the greatest authority of the generation or generations. There is no *nesiat panim*, no discrimination; when it comes to Halakhah, it stands or falls on its own merits. So if it's Halakhic authority, *da'as torah* does not grant that; and if it is

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can continue to rail against moral decadence if that is the price we have to pay, but I don't think, necessarily that's the price we pay for recognition as an independent and free group of thinking people.

AH: *Does "da'as torah" exist? If so, what is it and in what areas is its application legitimate?*

RL: I think there is such a thing as *da'as torah*, although I wonder about the term, which has more political connotations than anything else. But if you ask me, is there such a thing as a personality shaped by Torah? The answer is yes. Does this shaping by Torah translate itself into absolute truth? No, absolutely no. Of course, someone who is deeply involved in Torah eventually has a Torah intuition, and that intuition is along a line of development of *nevu'ah*. *Nevu'ah*, of course, is the very highest; we don't have it today – *ru'ach hakodesh*, possibly – but there is such a thing as *da'as torah*, and therefore, someone who we believe possesses it – and it cannot be legislated, incidentally, or elected by party functionaries, to a group of people designated as the pos-

in Hashkafah, anyway there is no decision-making. The Rambam says in three separate places in the Peirush HaMishnayot that you have *p'sak* in Halakhah, but not in Hashkafah. What then does it mean? It means that you can't be *mevatel* a person who has *da'as torah*; he deserves at least the courtesy of very, very careful consideration.

