

FT 6/1

Norman Lamm

From: Shaul Farber [shaul@itim.org.il]
Sent: Wednesday, May 20, 2009 3:22 AM
To: Norman Lamm
Subject: your comments would be appreciated
Attachments: Rabbi Norman Lamm.doc

Please look over and let me know what you think.
 Seth Farber

Setting the record straight on Rabbi Lamm

Rabbi Norman Lamm's recent Interview with the Jerusalem Post has generated much discussion around the Jewish world. As leader of Centrist Orthodoxy and Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva University, Rabbi Lamm is clearly at the apex of Modern Orthodox Jewish life. Thus, his statement "...we will soon say Kaddish on the Reform and Conservative movements," has been repercussive. While some non-Orthodox rabbis have challenged his claim by stating that Conservative and Reform Judaism are alive and well, others have taken his statement as an opportunity to further interdenominational dialogue. Across the non-Orthodox world, Rabbi Lamm has been portrayed as a triumphalist, who has affronted his colleagues and fellow-Jews.

Unfortunately, Rabbi Lamm's comment has been distorted, and even more unfortunately, the reputation of a man who has long fought a lonely battle to support his Reform and Conservative colleagues has been tarnished. The full citation from Rabbi Lamm reads "with a heavy heart, we will soon say Kaddish on the Reform and Conservative movements." Rabbi Lamm has not – and apparently has never – adopted a denigrating attitude to the non-Orthodox denominations. As recently as two months ago, Rabbi Lamm wrote – in his obituary for Rabbi Emmanuel Rackman – that he believes a disservice was done to American Judaism because denominational tags were allowed dictate one's commitment to Judaism.

Rabbi Lamm has been one of the great spokesmen for a moderate Orthodoxy which respects and believes in Klal Yisrael. He actively participated in interdenominational dialogue through the Synagogue Council of America, and he argued on many occasions, both from his pulpit and in his writings, that there will be an "unbridgeable and cataclysmic rupture within the Jewish community" unless Jews from all the denominations, including Orthodoxy, listen to each other and try and find a way to work together.

In the 1980s, Rabbi Lamm fought hard – together with his non Orthodox colleagues- to help resolve the "Who is a Jew" question, and in the mid 1990s, he supported the Ne'eman commission that pulled

together the Orthodox, Reform and Conservative communities to attempt to resolve the conversion crisis. In 1997 Rabbi Lamm spoke to a group called the World Council of Orthodox Leadership, and he suggested that Orthodox Jews welcome the creation of Reform and Conservative day schools and not see them as a threat to their own. Most recently, he republished an essay entitled *Seventy Faces*, where he argued that Orthodox Jews have a responsibility to engage the non-Orthodox movements with respect and integrity. To deny their existence or to ignore their contribution to American Jewry is reckless.

The prominent American Jewish demographer Steven Cohen recently argued that should present trends continue, Orthodox Jewry will be the dominant stream in American Jewry in the coming thirty years. I don't believe that Cohen—or Rabbi Lamm—believes that this is a desideratum. Clearly the non-Orthodox denominations play an important role in the fabric of Jewish life, both in America and to a lesser extent in Israel.

There is little to be gained by harping on a sound byte—particularly one that has been distorted by many. Instead, let us mobilize and rededicate ourselves to Rabbi Lamm's model of encounter, respect and moderation.