

The Face Of G-d?

In Response To Norman Lamm

By SIMCHA LEVINE

(First of Two Parts)

Rabbi Norman Lamm is one of the most gifted orators in today's English-speaking Torah world. It is precisely for this reason that we must be especially careful to protest, loudly and swiftly, the sort of thesis he presents in *The Face of G-d: Thoughts on the Holocaust*.

Rabbi Lamm decries arrogance, smug interpretations, utter self-confidence, and dogmatic infallibility. Indeed, so do we all. His emphatic words can then only astound: "In sum, if we ask if we may resort to the *mipnei chata'einu* rationale for the Holocaust, my answer is a resounding NO — indeed, six million times NO!"

It is precisely here that this whole line of reasoning is wrong. Claiming to oppose pat answers as arrogant, it provides the smoothest, most comfortable formula of all, and asserts its validity with absolute authoritativeness. While purporting to condemn insensitivity, it offers us, heirs all to this oh-so-recent devastation, license for shrugging all the horror away as unspeakable, unexplainable. The bottom line, even after the sublime utterances which follow, is: **This has nothing to do with me. I need not change my ways.**

There can be no greater insensitivity than that. For it must have something to do with me.

G-d did indeed bring this horror upon our people in unprecedented magnitude. That is a crucial point. In any individual case of suffering, it is possible to shrug, acknowledging one's inability to assess the matter. *Tzaddik vera lo*. An ancient problem. In this world, man cannot understand the ways of G-d. But when a punishment of such proportions comes upon our people, every fiber of the Jew's consciousness

recognizes that we are meant to search our ways. This many years later, each thinking Jew, at some level, is asking what can be learned from this nightmare. Can there be a greater desecration, more heinous callousness, more unforgivable indifference than to turn away from the events, and from the insistent intuition within ourselves without a lesson for our own behavior?

No. But the real danger here is greater still. In allowing such a catastrophe to go unexplained, even with all the silver phrases of supposed humility and whatever other abstractions Rabbi Lamm offers, we leave the thinking Jew unsatisfied. If there is nothing we can learn from it, why did He do it? Then, inevitably: Did He do it? No amount of metaphysics, no number of polysyllabic generalities, can then restore to the searching mind an appreciation of His *hashgacha*. Instead, the last stop on this road is, G-d forbid, a feeling that there is no justice and there is no Judge.

The idea that we have lived throughout all these centuries in a "bubble of meaninglessness" is simply blasphemous. As for *hester panim*, it is an abstract concept for which the concrete counterpart is: Esther. The story of Purim in which the name of G-d does not appear, in which His actions are completely hidden from view, is — as any school child can tell you — the epitome of His providential guidance of our history. *Hester panim* does not, G-d forbid, mean that He does not see! It means that His guidance is hidden

from our sight. Who ever would have thought it would be hidden so thoroughly that prominent rabbis, speaking in the name of Torah, would think it wasn't there?

Understanding of such concepts as "meaningful meaningfulness" is, I confess, quite beyond the scope of my mental faculties. Nor can I reconcile the conclusions Rabbi Lamm draws from Maimonides' words in the "Guide" with what the same Maimonides says quite clearly in the beginning of *Hilchot Taanit*: "It is a positive Torah commandment that whenever a trouble befalls the people, they should shout and blow the trumpets ... because when trouble befalls them, and they shout ... all will know that it is because of their evil deeds that harm has come to them... But, if they say: this thing is just the way of the world, and this trouble simply happened... then more troubles will be added to these."

Indeed, one can only be amazed at an assessment of the unprecedented events of the recent Holocaust as random. Volumes pile on top of volumes, written by Jew and gentile alike, attempting to explain the events that preceded World War II in Germany. How a civilized "twentieth-century" nation, a society based not on primitive religious fanaticism, but on science, could have turned on its Jews, who were mostly as indistinguishable from the rest of the population as Jews have ever been anywhere; how virtually every sector of the society of this cultured people could join forces, along with colleagues in so many neighboring countries, to wipe out the Jewish nation... No satisfactory explanation has been found by the proponents of natural law, try though they may to account for the events of this world without recourse to a Guiding Force.

The conclusion of any objective observer of these events would have to be, as Rabbi Lamm says, "It taxes credulity too much to accept that such extraordinary occurrences are the result of mere chance, of a throw of dice on the stage of history. My critical faculties refuse to assent to such events at such a time as the result of mere randomness."

Sadly, it is only the "happy" events which followed that bring Rabbi Lamm to use these words — the return of sovereignty to the Jewish nation over its Land, and ensuing miraculous events. Sadly, Rabbi Lamm, because one would expect from a scholar of your caliber a bit more flexibility in applying the knowledge that from Him come both "bad" events and good.

No, quite clearly, the way to handle recent historical events which, to be sure, seem unhandable, is to search relentlessly among them for ways to heighten our own righteousness.

The Ramban long ago gave his recommendation on this matter in his *Shaar Hagmul*. "It is proper for everyone who suffers an incident or mishap to believe that his trouble is because of his sin and transgression, and he should repent those (sins) which are known to him. And when he sees a righteous man punished despite his righteousness, he should first attribute it to the minority of transgressions that he (must have) committed. And if he knows of a perfectly pious person perishing though full of merit and free of sin, he should realize that, whether it can be known to him or not, there is, behind everything, justice and the perfect wisdom of G-d which is ultimately hidden from us... And you may ask: since there is a hidden aspect to His judgment and, in the end we will have

to rely on His absolute justice (where we cannot find a reason), why must we first go through this whole procedure? This argument is for fools who scorn wisdom, because this investigation which we describe will serve us well, making us wise men, knowers of G-d through His ways and deeds. And we will become more certain in our faith — both in that which is known and that which is unknown — than others, because we will deduce the unknown from the known, to understand the validity of the judgment. This is the duty of everyone created, serving through love or through fear: to use his mind in order to justify and verify G-d's justice to the extent that he is able..."

This is why those who have sought to understand the crime for which the Holocaust was punishment, have arrived at different conclusions. Each is using his mind, to the extent that he is able to find the transgression which should henceforth be avoided. Each is trying not to be a fool, who shrugs and relies on the unknowable depths of the Almighty's wisdom. In the end, yes, our intelligence is limited. But refusing to use what intelligence we have to perceive G-d's ways is folly.

(To be continued)

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(Second of Two Parts)

No, Rabbi Lamm, there is no grammatical error. Quite the contrary. *Chata'einu*, or *chata'ei avoteinu*. We use these interchangeably. Otherwise, the very expression *mipnei chata'einu* — which you chose — would be a mistake in its context. Our sins? Why, it wasn't even we who were exiled! But, no, that is not the way a Jew thinks. The written Torah, with all its accounts of the transgressions of our forbears in the wilderness is not slanderous. (After all, how dare we shake our self-righteous heads in disapproval of the transgressions of our forefathers?) But this is not idle calumny, because its purpose is to teach us what pitfalls to avoid.

Their sins are very likely to be our sins. This is the way all of Torah and all of history must be learned. The sensitive, thoughtful interpreter of history, the one who understands that the entire goal of his term on this earth is self-betterment, will always look at the past in terms of the present. What can I learn

from the mistake of my predecessors that will enable me and the rest of my people today to improve ourselves, to ascend to a higher level of piety and closeness to the Almighty?

In each case cited in your address, where our sages chastise the denigrator of the Jewish people, it is because his condemnation is to no constructive purpose. Look at all the instances, on the other hand, where our ancestors' misdeeds are spelled out for us, with the resultant punishments — so that we may learn how to serve Him better.

To say, for example (Erchin 15), that "our forefathers in the wilderness were punished ... only because of slander" is not random badmouthing, nor is it insensitive justification of their suffering. It is our sacred duty to learn from previous generations — and to teach others — in just this way. This is an obligation which our rabbis always shouldered. Today, despite the absence of prophecy, our most car-

ing rabbis, those most concerned for the welfare of the nation, are accepting the burden of this responsibility. They can do no less.

I wonder how Rabbi Lamm would view a comparable situation: Suppose a cancer researcher — who does not smoke — has concluded that smoking has led to the death and suffering of numerous individuals. He may recognize the possibility of other, unknowable factors. He may know that his evidence is not 100% unequivocal. But he is as convinced as a human being can be that smoking was the cause of all that harm. Should he keep quiet when people he cares about smoke too much? After all, he doesn't smoke. So who is he to talk?

And suppose another researcher, using his skills to the best of his ability, reaches a different conclusion. He believes that the proximity to industrial centers has been the chief cause of the illness and premature death of thousands. He doesn't live near such a center. But he is vehement in his recommendation that people should move away from such danger. Let us say that this man smokes, and the other man lives next door to a factory.

Would we say to both these people that they have no business castigating oth-

ers for faults that are not theirs? Would we be sarcastic about their knowing that this or that caused tragedy, or rather appreciative of their attempt, given the limits of human intelligence, to save others from pain?

The lesson which I myself took from the *churban* of Europe did, as it happens, come from the instruction of one who was there, suffering, and changed his path because of what he saw happening. Perhaps Rabbi Lamm does not mention Rabbi Yisachar Shlomo Teichtal, author of *Eim Habanim Smeicha*, because the awesome sincerity of his message simply can not be dismissed.

He had been a follower of the Munkacs-Satmar view that opposed the building and settlement of *Eretz Yisrael*. Seeing the unfolding of a nightmare, he examined his ways. He concluded that what was happening was a clear sign that the exile was meant to end. The Zionist builders of the Land, even though they were sinners, should be joined. The explanation which he found for the Holocaust affected him very painfully. He had to reverse his own views. But he did not stop there. He went on to rebuke all his colleagues. Because he

loved them. Because he cared.

This unique visionary went on to warn that after these atrocities would pass, Jews must not revert to normal relations with gentile hosts, nor resume lives of comfort in foreign lands. I, for one, am forever in his debt. Reading his words, feeling his terrible pain, I learned the lesson he was preaching. I moved my family to the Land where, I am convinced, the Almighty has clearly demonstrated that he wants us to serve Him. This is the message learned from *mipnei chata'einu* logic.

It is not surprising that his words find no echo in addresses like the one we just read. Because *chata'eihem chata'einu*. Because the sins of the fathers are, indeed, repeated by their sons. The problem is not that those rabbis point an accusing finger at other Jews for no reason. The problem is that the finger points at us, and we do not want to hear.

Yes, a smoker now suffering from lung cancer, who changed his ways, would be the most effective, most moving, at reprimanding smokers. But there are only so many of these. Can we disqualify all others out of hand, and deprive the rest of the world of the potential

benefit of hearing their well-intentioned admonitions?

I do not believe that the rabbis so thoroughly condemned by Rabbi Lamm's oratory are interested in "blaming" anybody. They seek to learn the lesson of the worst beating the Jews have ever taken from their father. Personally, I disagree vehemently with the Satmarer view, for example. But I must respect and admire any leader who — using his learning, and his mind, to interpret Divine Providence — teaches and preaches his conclusions to all his people, in the hope that all may benefit from past punishments.

I think that sincere efforts in this direction are all that G-d demands of us (and that whether the deductions are objectively right or wrong is secondary). Surely He does not want our censure of current Torah leaders who are working to prevent further beatings. It cannot be that He prefers murmurings of humility regarding horrors of the past, and eloquent shrugs which claim to exalt the memory of the martyrs while refusing to let those martyrs affect our own actions. If there is a moral deficiency, it is here.

But there is one more

(Continued on Page 22C)

The Face Of G-d?

(Continued from Page 10)

important point that must be made with regard to the nature of the search for cause and explanation. At this time, there is little chance that anyone alive can pinpoint the misdeed that accounted for the suffering of any individual in the Holocaust. Indeed, although the Ramban has recommended that we think this way even with individuals, it is a tricky business at best. No one is comfortable doing this, even for contemporaries, even if we know them well. Each and every one of the *kedoshim* must, at this point, be remembered only in terms of what that word

means. (*Kadosh* — there is a concept worthy of study and attention. A concept worthy of Rabbi Lamm's considerable expository talents.)

It is the calamity as a whole that must be addressed in accordance with the time-honored formula of — yes — *mipnei chata'einu*. When supernatural events of such proportions befall our people, woe unto the survivor who turns his back, claiming himself incapable of interpreting G-d's message, finding no area in which to improve his own service of the Almighty.
