

Dr. Norman Lamm, president of Yeshiva University since 1976, is a rabbi, teacher, author and philosopher. His wide scope of scholarship and interests range from religious philosophy to areas of human rights and the seeking of solutions to modern problems in light of Talmudic law. Dr. Lamm is widely published, and he has gained wide recognition for his writings and discourses on interpretations of Jewish philosophy and law in relation to problems involving science, technology, and philosophy in today's society.

In this interview with *The Jewish Review*, Dr. Lamm talks about the synthesis of Torah studies with secular knowledge (Madda), the subject of his forthcoming book entitled: *Torah U-Madda: The Encounter of Religious Learning and Worldly Knowledge in the Jewish Tradition*.

**Jewish Review:** Dr. Lamm, what is the problem of Torah-U-Madda (Torah and Secular Knowledge) and why is it necessary to present a halakhic and philosophical defense of this concept?

**Dr. Lamm:** Let me begin by providing you with one perspective on this problem. The highest ideal or the highest value in Judaism is *talmud Torah*, the study of Torah. The obverse of this value is, therefore, also true: that a major infraction is *bitul Torah* or the wasting of time that should otherwise be used for the study of Torah. The consequence of this principle would appear to be that one must use all of one's available time for the study of Torah and this would seem to rule out any other kind of cognitive activity such as the study

was a college student there were also those who opposed Torah U-Madda, but even those who opposed it were not as vehemently opposed as they are today. I came from Torah Vodaath, and they were not very pleased with the fact of my studying at Yeshiva University, but many of their students went to college in those days in the evenings. Otherwise, where would we get all the religious accountants from in my generation? But now they've tightened the reins somewhat and what apparently was permitted to the parents is often, though not always, forbidden to the children. There is now developing a whole philosophy of "Torah Only" which raises the ignorance of the secular world to the level of *desideratum*, and that is something I simply

Therefore, I would want them at least to understand what we are saying. I don't expect them necessarily to agree (I would be delighted if they did), but I at least want them to understand that this is an earnest, authentic attempt at grappling with a major cultural/educational problem from a Torah perspective.

**Jewish Review:** Do you hope through the book to be able to convert some of them to your point of view?

**Dr. Lamm:** Not convert. My purpose is that those of us in the Torah-U-Madda world should understand this point of view conceptually as well as live it functionally, and that those in the "Torah Only" world should respect it. I conclude the book with a vision of a pluralistic Orthodox community, and it's difficult to arrive at such pluralism if we don't respect them and they don't respect us. I suspect that our respect for them will be more forthcoming than the reverse, but we've got to try.

**Jewish Review:** With regard to the issue of pluralism, there are many points in the book where you seem to indicate that the "Torah Only" perspective provides us with a wrong view of things. For example, you say that certain *poskim* (halakhic decisors)

*chakhamim* (scholarly students) and exposing them to a life with a major emphasis on Torah, although they, too, would have to have some knowledge about the world as such. We do that here, incidentally. We have four *kollelim* here at Yeshiva University itself, but these are people who do have unusual knowledge and ability, and I should emphasize that it isn't everyone that goes to a *kolel*.

**Jewish Review:** Once they go to the *kolel*, is it really a Torah Only approach?

**Dr. Lamm:** Yes, almost all of our *kolel* students have gone through college, and they're marvelous *talmidei chakhamim*. They are learning full time and spend many years learning, and that's what it should be if they want to become *poskim*. They've got to spend a great many years "learning only," but they also do have an awareness of the universe around them.

**Jewish Review:** You speak of certain risks involved in Torah-U-Madda. Could you specify what some of those are and explain why you feel the potential benefits outweigh those risks?

**Dr. Lamm:** Yes, of course there are risks in Torah U-Madda. Any knowledge that can never be dangerous is also never worth



# TORAH AND SECULAR KNOWLEDGE:

## AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. NORMAN LAMM

of history, philosophy, science, astronomy, etc. It is for this reason that secular study presents a problem. It presents a problem, of course, only for those who are inside the Torah community, those who are within the halakhic fraternity. People who are outside of this fraternity have no problem with secular learning. For them, we might say, the problem is "Who needs Torah?" But for those of us who are committed to Torah, we are automatically faced with the question of what to do with all other areas in the cognitive universe, all knowledge other than Halakha. A similar problem confronts even those who are committed to a "Torah only" point of view. This is because once they have ruled out all so-called secular and profane learning, then they must confront the question of whether *all* Jewish learning is good or whether certain types of Jewish learning are to be preferred over others. There are those, for example, who will learn nothing but Halakha and who regard everything outside of Halakha not as strictly forbidden, but as not really appropriate for the educational elite.

**Jewish Review:** You state that you and your second generation American peers at Yeshiva University have been far more concerned, and at times even critical, of the confluence of Jewish and secular education?

**Dr. Lamm:** This has to do, of course, with the sociological complexion of the Orthodox Jewish community — its having intensified and gone rightward. When I

ly cannot subscribe to. I should point out that all Torah-U-Madda is based upon the belief that the world of culture outside of Torah is not necessarily a friend or an enemy, and you must neither dismiss it with contempt and fight it, nor embrace it without reservation. But, on the contrary, you have to be both critical and respectful of it, and it is this sort of engagement which is what we stand for.

**Jewish Review:** Why is it important for you and others who are involved in the Torah U-Madda perspective to address the "Torah Only" point of view? How could you hope, as you put it in your book, for them to appreciate the religious authenticity and spiritual earnestness of those who seek to integrate Torah with Madda, when for the most part they believe that Madda is forbidden?

**Dr. Lamm:** My reasons for discussing the polemic between Torah-U-Madda and "Torah Only" are twofold. First, our own people, those who subscribe to Torah U-Madda, have to understand it because there is a problem and if we have a *shitah* or a *derekh* (path) in response to this problem, then we have to explain it properly. Second, even those who stand outside the Torah-U-Madda fraternity, those of the "Torah Only" group, need to understand our perspective. I still have a great deal of affection for many of them personally and, as I say in my book, my disagreement with them does not preclude me from having a great deal of respect for their point of view.

might make errors because they are not familiar with areas of secular knowledge that interface with Judaism.

**Dr. Lamm:** Yes, of course, and I disagree with them.

**Jewish Review:** You disagree with them, but you can, nevertheless, embrace their view as a viable choice?

**It is very clear that a person who engages in Torah and Madda is in no way compromising Torah by studying Madda.**

**Dr. Lamm:** I embrace it as *one* of the viable choices. Within a large community, I accept that a certain number of people should go along with Torah Only. But I also say that if the entire community were Torah Only, we couldn't survive. If it were the case, for example, in the State of Israel that everyone who did anything of significance outside of a *kolel* had to be a non-religious person, this would be a sure formula for self-destruction. Nor do I think that this is what the Torah envisions — that everyone should be studying in a *kolel*. What about the dictum, "*kol Torah Sheain imah melakhah*," all Torah that has no work with it, no labor, will ultimately self-destruct and cause sin in its place. Chazal were not necessarily in favor of everyone in the world going into a *kolel*. I could see taking a limited number of very brilliant *talmidei*

striving for. It's like anything else in life: Love, for example, is a great ideal, yet love can be very dangerous. You could love the wrong person or you could love illicitly. Peace is marvelous, *Sim Shalom*, but peace with the devil is dangerous. Democracy is a great idea, but democracy taken to an extreme means we can all vote to worship

the Baal. Any great idea can be exploited and abused. All knowledge that is worthwhile can be dangerous, and a Torah-U-Madda approach means exposing students to the cultural winds that are current in the contemporary world. Not all of them are good, and not all of them are compatible with a Torah viewpoint. There is always a danger, therefore, that instead of looking at it critically, the student will embrace it, especially because Torah Jews are a "cognitive minority" not only within the broad American picture, but even within the Jewish community, and it is very difficult to live as a lone wolf, as it were, intellectually. So there is a tendency to give in, and that's the danger. But it's worth taking that risk because doing the opposite means that we have given up our commission of being a *Goy kadosh umamlekhet*



**Kohanim.** As I say in the book, we are in danger of no longer being "a holy nation and a Kingdom of Priests," but, instead, becoming a safe sect and a *denomination* of Priests, and that's not exactly what we were told to do at Har Sinai.

**Jewish Review:** I want to ask you about your interpretation of the Rambam. It seems that, in your view, the Rambam held that a believing, thinking Jew needs a large and embracing vision which somehow goes beyond Torah itself. Could you elaborate on this?

**Dr. Lamm:** It goes beyond Halakha. According to Rambam, this is the essence of Torah. Halakha itself is one of the greatest systems imaginable in that it prescribes a way of life which leads to personal and collective *kedusha* (holiness). It is a way of life that comes *miSinai* (from Sinai, from time immemorial). It's a system which cognitively is an untapped resource of thought that has to be explicated and extrapolated, but still it has to be seen within a larger context. In other words, if I don't begin with the idea that there's a *Ribono Shel Olam*, (a Master of the Universe), then Halakha is no longer what it ought to be. It becomes merely some kind of antiquarian's quest for knowledge about an obsolete system, and it doesn't have any effect on life. Halakha can be meaningful only if it is seen in a larger ideational or ideological context. This is a point that the Rambam, the Maharal, Kabbalah and Chasidism make, and a point that the mitnagdim (those opposed to the chasidim) make, as well. The chasidim, of course, quote the *Zohar* to this effect. If you don't have this more capacious context, a view or a vision of God and Man, then Halakha suffers from isolation; it doesn't really come into its own. That's true for the kabbalists, for the chasidim, and for the mitnagdim themselves. The greatest mitnagdim were all involved in the Kabbalah — the Gaon of Vilna and R. Chaim of Volozhon were basically kabbalists. So they, too, saw Halakha within such a larger context.

**Jewish Review:** And in some sense then, Kabbalah and chasidism, or the way in which you've interpreted the chasidic quest, is the larger vision which you are outlining in your book.

**Dr. Lamm:** In the book, I present six models of Torah-U-Madda. The last one is really the one that's my "darling" and also, I might say, the gutsiest or the riskiest. This is because the chasidim, historically, were not Torah-U-Madda people, clearly not. But I maintain, nevertheless, that by taking some of their grand principles, their most fundamental concepts, and extrapolating from them, one comes specifically to a Torah-U-Madda conclusion: the idea that God has to be served not only by following His commandments, but also by following Him; by serving God in every aspect of life. This is called the *Avodat Hashem Be'-Gashmiyut*, "serving Him through corporeality." So, eating, drinking whatever you do, is part of this service. The Baal Shem Tov once said that, in whatever you're doing, whatever you concentrate upon, you find the *nitzot*. These "sparks of God," as they are described in Lurianic Kabbalah, are in every physical object, every physical deed, in every cognitive deed, and every cultural mode. This means that Madda is not only studied because it leads to something else which is good or kosher, but rather because it, itself, is a way to reach *Hakadosh Baruch Hoo*. Now, whereas Torah is a more immediate

method, it is *Avodat Hashem Be'ruchniut*, "a spiritual way of serving God," nevertheless the way of service through *gashmiyut*, or its cognitive equivalent, is a way of appreciating Madda in and of itself as a Jewish religious experience.

**Jewish Review:** Within the chasidic theory, there are sparks, *nitzot*, in everything. Some they say belong to the *kellipat nogah* or that aspect of the world which it is possible to raise in God's service, but some of these sparks, the chasidim tell us, are not possible for us to "raise" and we shouldn't get involved with those at all.

**Dr. Lamm:** *Kellipat nogah* in Lurianic Kabbalah is that which comes from *Etz Ha-daat Tov Va'Ra* (the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil). *Kellipat Nogah* (which means Venus, incidentally), is where good and evil are intermingled and our task is to separate the holy from the impure, the right from the wrong, the true from the false, and elevate it and, thereby, sanctify the whole thing.

**Jewish Review:** This is a conception which it seems the Lubavitcher Chasidim would be in sympathy with. I've heard it said, for example, that, according to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, an artist works in a material medium, and that by painting a Torah-inspired painting, he is somehow raising the sparks that exist within that matter.

**Dr. Lamm:** I have a great deal of sympathy for Chabad. I'm a great admirer of Chabad thought, and if I use their metaphors, it is because I feel a fundamental sympathy with their whole world-view. I come from chasidic stock, too, but my training in Yeshivas from the very beginning was all with Lithuanian *Mitnagdim*. So you see, when it comes to Torah-U-Madda, I arrive with a predisposition for cultural schizophrenia...

**Jewish Review:** How does Torah-U-Madda reestablish, in your words, "a historical and spiritual primordial harmony."

**Dr. Lamm:** Rav Zadok HaCohen of Lublin says in his *Tzidkat Hatzaddik*, that he had read or heard someplace that God wrote a book and that book is the world, and that He also wrote a commentary and that commentary is the Torah. So the world and the Torah are related as a text and commentary. Now this means that the two of them together form a whole, and that is a primordial harmony. To go further, we can ask: what is the essence of Chumash *Bereishit*, of Genesis? The idea that God created the world. What is the essence, the high point of Chumash *Shemot*, (Exodus): God gave the Torah. So God, in His office of creator, and God in His office of revealer or teacher, are both one. Torah-U-Madda means Torah relates to *Shemot*, and Madda relates to *Bereishit*. Or Madda relates to the book, Torah relates to the commentary, but the two of them are taken together. Through Torah-U-Madda you reestablish that harmony. In this way, it's a form of the kabbalistic reintegration of the world through

the raising of the sparks. So Torah-U-Madda really makes for an *Adam Hashalem*, a whole person.

**Jewish Review:** In kabbalistic terms, this would be the *tikun* (restoration) after the *shevirah*, (shattering or breaking asunder).

**Dr. Lamm:** Precisely.

**Jewish Review:** What are some of the psychological problems which Torah-U-Madda individuals (particularly at Yeshiva University) experience and what can be done to help them with these problems?

**Secular study presents a problem, of course, only for those who are inside the Torah community, those who are within the halakhic fraternity. People who are outside of this fraternity have no problem with secular learning. For them, we might say, the problem is "Who needs Torah?"**

**Dr. Lamm:** By its very nature, Torah-U-Madda causes a certain amount of cognitive distress or psychological tension. That tension cannot be escaped; that tension is simply there. Torah-U-Madda is not meant for psychological cowards, people who are afraid to venture into thinking. Torah-U-Madda pulls you in different directions because in pursuing Torah-U-Madda, you are attempting to comprehend and reintegrate two world views that are disparate. They're separate worlds, and you can't simply take them and put them back together as in a jig-saw puzzle. They don't mesh beautifully. Instead, there's always a tension between them. Now, that tension is the cause of psychological distress, but it is also the cause of tremendous cultural and religious creativity because when you take these two worlds that were separated, from *Bereishit* to *Shemot*, or text and commentary, and reembrace them, there is a tremendous potential in their synthesis. Yes, there is tension, however, working with that tension is creative. I don't know of any creative work that is free from tension. It simply doesn't exist. Anyone who wants perfect peace has only to look down six feet and he has it.

**Jewish Review:** Could you comment on the notion of *Shelemut*, the whole, fully actualized individual, in the context of your chasidic model of Torah-U-Madda? Also, your notion of the self as a "symphony" is an intriguing one. Could you tell us something about that?

**Dr. Lamm:** Towards the end of my book, I speak about the concept of *shelumut*, of "wholeness." In the past, this concept was generally applied to Torah and *Middot*, Jewish learning combined with an individual's character, with each coming to full expression. I maintain that genuine *shelemut* must comprehend much more than this. It has to be informed as well by the fullness of one's intellectual outreach, not only in Torah, but also in every arena.

Now this sense of *shelemut* or wholeness can be derived from several of the Torah-U-Madda models I discuss, but it arises particularly from the chasidic model because, according to this model, Madda as well as Torah contains within itself the potential for religious experience. This means that Torah, Madda and *Tikun Hamidot* (improvement of one's character), are all areas for religious growth. All of them are integrated in the fully developed individual. It is, to my mind,

very clear that a person who engages in Torah and Madda is in no way compromising Torah by studying Madda. It is a compromise only if he studies Maddah for *parnassah*, for a vocational reason. But if he does it for religious reasons, for Jewish reasons, because he wants to probe G-d's presence in all the universe, then this clearly is a part of his religious growth and a part of his *shelemut*, instead of something extraneous to it.

What I mean by the human personality as a symphony or orchestra is derived from a Platonic idea which Yehuda Halevi makes use of, to the effect that the reason of a superior human being will rule over his life in the same way that a mayor or prince rules over a city. He will give expression to everything in its proper measure. When you have a city, you have garbage collectors and philosophers, physicians and lawyers, secretaries and artists: all kinds of people with all kinds of roles. The ruler must see to it that all these various aspects of the community or collectivity mesh together, and that no one aspect displaces any other. Each individual has to have his role in the economy of an entire community. Now, the same thing is true with respect to a person who may very well, for example, be a genius as an artist, but could be corrupt in his character or be a boor intellectually. Such an individual really is a genius, but not a genius who has attained wholeness. The same is also true regarding Torah-U-Madda: the ideal should be that you lead the orchestra like the prince who sees that everything meshes together and that everything finds its proper place. It's possible that your proportion of Torah, Madda, character, and art, for example, will be somewhat different from mine, but everything has to find a place in each of our personalities and then, when it all meshes together, you've got the harmonious whole.

**Jewish Review:** Towards the end of the book you seem to speak about the question of Torah Only versus Torah-U-madda, as if this were a choice left open to the individual. Is this a correct interpretation of what you're saying and wouldn't such a pluralistic view of Orthodoxy somehow undermine the whole notion that there is a halakhic way that each person must follow?

**Dr. Lamm:** That's not really so. The halakhic way does not mean that we no longer have any choices. I think that's a fallacy,

(continued on page 26)

## NEXT ISSUE:

### Obligations of Orthodoxy

### An interview with:

### Rabbi Emanuel Rackman



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### LAMM INTERVIEW ...

(continued from page 15)

one that, I think, is unfortunate. We seem to feel that once we accept the halakhic commitment, the Halakha restricts us totally. On the contrary, the halakhic commitment enhances our need to choose, rather than robbing us of our freedom. Halakha covers a great many facets of life, but not everything. Otherwise, the Ramban wouldn't say in *Kedoshim*, for example, that it is possible to be a *naval bi'reshut Ha-Torah*: You can do all that the Halakha demands of you and still be a rascal, a scoundrel. How is that possible? The answer is that there are many areas of Torah in which you still have to use your capacity for choice. I don't believe that in all instances there is only one way because if there were only one way, you wouldn't have chasidim and mitnagdim; you wouldn't have Sefardim and Ashkenazim; *Torah Im Derekh Eretz*, and *Torah-U-Madda*; rationalists and anti-rationalists; or Mussar and anti-Mussar. You have so many different views and visions within the context of halakhic Judaism that to say that there's only one way is a major fallacy.

We're restricted enough by Halakha. You don't have to overstate it by saying there is only *one* way to go. The question of *Torah-U-Madda* and *Torah Only*, as I point out in my book, is not necessarily a halakhic problem. There are problems that go beyond Halakha. Are you a Zionist or an anti-Zionist? — and is this a halakhic problem? You find *Torah-observant* Jews on both sides of this issue. For example, Mizrahi and Agudah, *shtachim* and not *shtachim*. These are really problems that go beyond Halakha and sometimes the effort to reduce great historical policy questions to a paragraph in the *Shulkhan Arukh* is a distortion. It just doesn't work. **Jewish Review:** How far does *Torah-U-Madda* go for the observant Jew? Does it include the serious study, for example, of other religions and what about the so called "scientific study" of Jewish scripture?

**Dr. Lamm:** I think that any educated Jew has to have some knowledge of other religions. Look, you can't learn *Gemara Avodah Zara* without knowing something about ancient mythology and idolatry. To say that our students should not have any knowledge at all about Christianity and shouldn't know what the Trinity is all about is like saying that a *Talmid Chacham* shouldn't know how idolators serve the god Mercury. But the *Gemara* has a whole discussion about service of that pagan god. What is a Moloch? What is Baal? These are questions you need to ask in order to understand Talmud. This doesn't mean I have to throw myself into the study of these religions and study their scriptures with a feeling of great reverence, but it means simply to be aware of them because otherwise you wouldn't know the world within which you live. Certainly a *posek* (religious decisor) when called upon to *pasken a sheilah* (decide on a religious question), needs to know about these things in order to perform this rabbinic function. How could you say you are or are not allowed to give a Christmas present to your gentile employees if you don't know what Christmas is supposed to mean? So certain basic rudiments we simply have to have in order to know the world in which we live. You're not studying the religion for its own sake; you're studying about

what other people believe and, especially in a pluralistic society such as the United States, and for that matter, most of the world today, this kind of knowledge is important for the educated Jew. When the walls come tumbling down in places like Berlin, we don't have to set up new ones ourselves.

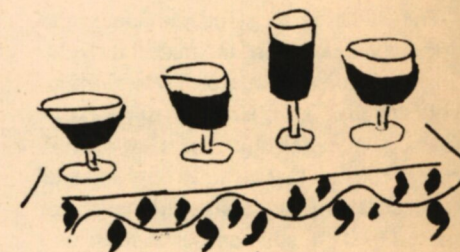
Now, as far as the scientific study of Scripture, Orthodoxy has not really tackled this problem properly. We have not really found the answers to that problem because we have not had enough scholars studying it. Since David Tzvi Hoffman, who wrote his famous work on *Vayikra* and who attacked the early Wellhausen thesis, we haven't really had truly Orthodox scholars of the first order working in Bible. So I would say, therefore, that it's a *terra incognita* and a dangerous one, probably, for Orthodox Jews who are not very well versed and prepared. What I would want to see are students who would come forth, who are totally possessed of *emunah shelamah*, genuinely pious people, and bright and intelligent, who would specialize in this area so we could raise the next David Tzvi Hoffman for our generation.

**Jewish Review:** Are you making any headway in this direction at Yeshiva University?

**Dr. Lamm:** Our scientific critical studies are not done in RIETS. They are done in the Bernard Revel Graduate School. In Revel we have a Talmud department and a Bible Department. Our specialization in Bible is primarily exegesis, mostly in *mefarshim* which is a very important field. We have some work in Semitics, in language, but nothing on Bible *per se* that I know of. We haven't had a top man in the field. Again, I would be delighted if I found someone who was ready to go into it and who is genuinely fortified religiously, who has the intellectual stamina and the psychological guts to hold on to his *emunah* in this mine field. I think it would be a great contribution if we could develop someone of that sort; but that takes time.

**Jewish Review:** But it's certainly not something that's *asur* (forbidden) on its face?

**Dr. Lamm:** How could you say it's *asur*? You would have to disqualify Ibn Ezra. We would have to disqualify David Tzvi Hoffman. Of course, there are those who disqualify them anyway ... but I'm not worried about them. □



### ERRATUM

The following paragraph was inadvertently omitted from Robin Hirsch's *Covenant* in Volume 3, Number 4. It should have appeared on page 4, column 3, as the second full paragraph.

And here am I in New York, six months older than my father was when I was born, and here, miraculously, is Alexander. And now, suddenly, however briefly, we are nine. And complicated, turmoil-ridden, tenuous though my family history has been, it is still, willy-nilly, a Jewish history and there is still a tattered fabric to sew him into.