

Excerpts of Remarks by Dr. Norman Lamm at the
Orthodox Union National Convention--11/27/98

I used to think that "nothing"--that is, complete secularism and assimilation-- is better than Reform and Conservative affiliation. After all, they offered an easy way out of full observance, short-cuts that eviscerated the Halakha by denying its authority, and allowed defectors from Orthodoxy to imagine that they simply changed labels but maintained full fealty to Judaism--all without any guilt feelings. Indeed, that was true--40 or 50 years ago. "Nothing" was too frightening an alternative to the burden of observance from which many Jews were seeking to escape; most American Jews of that period--largely first or second generation Americans--were too rooted in Jewish tradition to abandon it completely. They still cherished and clung to their ethnicity. For those generations, in the social and communal conditions under which they lived, the non-Orthodox movements did indeed constitute a danger. But that is no longer true because the religious and communal environment in which we live has changed radically. Total assimilation, intermarriage, even conversion no longer loom as unmitigated tragedies for a typical Jewish family in America. The world has been altered (to the worse), and our policy must adapt to new conditions if we are to save the majority of American Jews from total apostasy. The road to *shemad*, such as Christianity or the various Oriental religions, is much shorter and smoother from secularism than from Reform and Conservatism.

In a remarkable passage in his *Tzidkat ha-Tzaddik*, the Hasidic thinker R. Zadok of Lublin points to the generations of Jews who flourished during the period of the Prophets. Some of them were marked by widespread defection from Torah, whereby the majority of the people descended into crass idolatry. *Yet they were considered Jews because they considered themselves and identified themselves as Jews.* This does not mean that Jewishness is available cheaply to whoever declares it for himself. But it does confirm that halakhically valid Jews remain Jews even if they hang on only by the gossamer threads of "Jewish identity." By the same token, R. Zadok maintains, conversion to Islam is of such serious consequence that better one should submit to martyrdom than convert, even though Islam is severely monotheistic, legislates sexual morality, and prohibits homicide--the three sins which alone require martyrdom as preferable to transgression. The reason: such apostasy to Islam involves the surrender of Jewish identity.

This lesson must not be lost on us as we grapple with painful issues peculiar to us in the fading years of this incredible century. The problem for the majority of American Jews is not their neglect of Shabbat or *tefillin* or the study of Torah; it is their very *identity* as Jews. We--and I include myself--have often been derisive of this concern for "Jewish identity" by the official agencies of the larger community (especially those led by persons whose own Jewish identity is questionable if not precarious). We considered it a smoke screen for minimalism, distracting leadership from the serious issues, and knew that by itself it was simply inadequate for Jewish survival. I still feel strongly that in the long run, "Jewish identity" by itself is a weak reed indeed on which to pin the hopes of Jewish continuity. Yet we must now admit that it has *some* value, at least short-term, and therefore in crisis conditions even those on the fringes of Judaism, whether organized as denominations or not, all those who strive for mere identity, should be honored for their efforts and should be objects of our sympathetic concern. And if more direct and fruitful relationships with Conservative and Reform groups will help in that direction, it is well worth the effort--despite profound disagreements between us and them in so very many fundamental areas.

I do not mean to exonerate Reform and Conservative leadership for their recent truculence on matters pertaining to Israel. Some of them have been--both here and there--unforgivably nasty in their Orthodox-bashing. I do not subscribe to that pernicious relativism that nowadays goes by the name of "pluralism"--a term that has suffered from over-use and over-popularity and hence is committing semantic suicide. I do not advocate the exchange of pulpits and other forms intra-Jewish syncretism. But I prefer that the non-Orthodox majority of American Jewry be religiously affiliated rather than unidentified and unaffiliated--the "nothing" that means total secularism and assimilation, and that leads ultimately to the annihilation of all Jewish associations, feelings, and identification.

Concerning our relationships with the Haredi communities, I am certainly *very* interested in, and welcome, warm and respectful cooperation with them at all levels. We have overwhelming commonalties; our differences do not at all touch fundamentals. Despite mutual criticisms and policy differences, there is every reason for happy and productive relations. *But*--no one should expect us to deviate from our principles as the price of cooperation and coordination, nor should anyone dictate to us to whom we may or may not talk. I remain open to any respectful overtures by leaders of the Haredi world, privately or publicly, and pray that we may work together in peace and friendship "to magnify Torah and to glorify it."