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October 14, 1988

Dr. Norman Lamm
President
Yeshiva University
500 West 185 Street
New York, NY 10033

Dear Norman:

During the year, I am rushed and cannot get into much reading in a substantial way beyond immediate preparation for classes and writings. In August and September however I get my chance to catch up on my back reading. This summer I brought along two of your writings, "Some Comments on Centrist Orthodoxy" and "The Face of God: Thoughts on the Holocaust". This is a belated fan letter.

It was a pleasure to read both pieces. Personally I always worry that administration and organization will erode my scholarship and intellectual vitality. It was a pleasure to see that your own thinking continues to mature and deepen despite the many burdens of your office. The effort must be very great but it is surely worthwhile.

The 'centrist' article is an important articulation at a time when ideological awareness and self-confidence is at a low ebb in the community. The three principles of synthesis, moderation and centrality of the people of Israel are right on. It was really important to have you say that the 'changes' centrist Orthodox has introduced result "not in the diminution of Torah but in its expansion. Some changes are, indeed, for the good. And such positive and welcome changes were introduced at many a critical juncture in Jewish history." Aside from the truthfulness of these statements, they are courageous--coming at a time when everybody is leaning over backwards to avoid criticism. The list of the unprecedented challenges to our whole way of life and of thinking also was courageous, correct and central to the future agenda of the whole Jewish people and not just modern Orthodoxy.

The entire interpretation of "the Way of the Lord" was outstanding. Equally significant was the humor and the charm of your satire on the response to Abraham pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah in our time.

Finally, I was most touched by the integrity of your analysis of the tension between love of Israel and the love of Torah. Everybody likes to affirm both loves--promiscuously and without cost. The true integrity of your words is the recognition that the observant have been reduced to a decided minority. There truly is an ongoing tension in resolving the needs of Torah and Israel in a form that will maximize our ability to save both.

In general, most of us are reluctant to admit conflict, the need for choices, the pain of prioritizing and of being faithful to two magnificent principles which nevertheless are in conflict. Modern Orthodoxy should not be superficial--based on a shallow reading of the conflicts. It should grow out of the highest levels of tension and insight, hammered and forged in the very recesses of the soul. The first step is to speak candidly and articulate the problems for people to begin to deal with them. In the past, sometimes, I felt that you were reluctant to articulate some of the choices that must be made in Modern Orthodoxy so I was all the more impressed and touched by your approach.

Your article on "The Face of God" was equally interesting and affective. Your rejection of the mipnai hata'einu philosophy is correct and courageous. Hester panim is one of the most promising and fruitful approaches to understanding history in the light of the Shoah. One of the most moving things about the Rav's Kol Dodi Dofek was its articulation of the intensity of the Hester panim that marks the Shoah. You are walking in his footsteps and pointing us in one of the right directions.

Your most intriguing suggestion is to bring together the whole period from the destruction of the Second Temple to the Shoah as a period of Hester panim--with the suggestion that Israel is the beginning of nesiat panim. This is at once, a most magnetic and most troublesome suggestion. (This in itself is an indication that this is right. In dealing with the Holocaust, a good rule of thumb is that answers that trouble us are closer to the truth than answers that satisfy us.)

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P.S. I enclose a copy of the letter that I sent to the JEWISH OBSERVER. Unfortunately, I doubt that they will publish it but it does address some of the questions about the Christianity article that you yourself raised to me.

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always been correct in making these explorations--but it is of the essence of such explorations that one cannot be correct all the time. These explorations deserve serious hearing and honest critique--not dismissal or attempts to delegitimize. So I turn to you. The fact that I am frozen out of public participation at Yeshiva University and at the other forums of Modern Orthodoxy is a way of denying serious consideration. In many communities, this is a way of punishing those who pioneer or who explore the frontiers. I appeal to you to help me break that boycott because I truly feel I am fighting the battles of Modern Orthodoxy and your battles. (Obviously, I do not claim to represent the Modern Orthodox consensus.)

It is true that there is a political cost in connecting to me. The extent of the cost is a direct outgrowth of the previous silence and backing away by people who should have stood together and insisted that these issues must be explored. It should be made clear that anybody who explores will be treated with respect and given a fair hearing and intelligent criticism. It probably harder to reverse the isolation now. Of course, I recognize that the Christianity article hasn't helped. However, there is never a good time to take a stand against injustice--particularly when there is momentum or a tide on the outer side. But once a stand is taken tides have a way of turning and changing.

You are feeling your way to a major reassertion of Modern Orthodoxy and opening a new era of your personal leadership for the Orthodox community and for the total Jewish community. If I can participate fully in the community, it will create an environment in which you too can speak more freely and more deeply and generate a more dynamic exchange and deeper religious and spiritual response.

Warmest best wishes.

Sincerely yours,


Irving Greenberg
IG:blm
Enclosure