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The Rabbi as Spiritual Leader

~~Rabbi~~ Norman Lamm

Excerpted

Rabbi Norman Lamm presents his view of the challenges and opportunities, the obstacles and the rungs, facing the contemporary rabbi, now and for the foreseeable future. It is Excerpted from comments he delivered at a Semikvah Convocation at Yeshiva University in 1978.

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The following comments refer to those who are professionally involved in *melechet ha-kodesh* (sacred activity). As one who has been deeply immersed in this activity for well over twenty-five years, I think I understand some of the problems a rabbi faces. I specifically address myself to the internal psychological tensions that afflict a rabbi, tensions that could become a source of creativity but also are reason for great anguish and moral torment. If there is one clearly identifiable mood that looms above all others as a threat to the effectiveness, happiness, and even sanity of a committed Rav in this last quarter of a century, it is frustration. There is nothing quite as noxiously potent as frustration in defeating a rabbi, and in robbing him of his inspiration, his ability to function, and his idealism.

The evil queen

I can think of no better paradigm of this dangerous defeatism than the story of Elijah in the famous passage in Kings 1:19. Jezebel swears that she will kill the prophet. Elijah retreats into the desert to think. He sits under a tree – and he gives up: *vayish'al et nafsho la-mut. Va-yomer rav atah Hashem, kach nafshi ki lo tov anokhi me'avotai.* He just wants to die. He wants to die, and says saying "enough! Now take my life" *out!* A spiritual leader who is prevented from leading spiritually sees no point to life. The emptiness is a fate worse than death. His audience has evaporated, his admonitions fall on deaf ears, his miraculous achievements fail to impress these obdurate Jews, and now they want to kill him. Well, let them! *near* His prophetic mission is stillborn, he is a frustrated and defeated and desperate man, and he might as well resign and give up the ghost.

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But God will not accommodate Elijah. An angel feeds him and sends him on a forty-day and forty-night trek to Mount Horeb. Elijah sleeps in a cave, and the *devar Hashem* comes to Elijah and inquires: *mah lekha poh Eliyahu* – what are you doing here, Elijah? His pathetic plaint is poured out, and the gall and the bitterness still affect us across the centuries: *vayomer kano kineiti la-Hashem.* Tzeva'ot "I have come to regret *that I am no better than you*" *my childish conduct, my spiritual immaturity.*

one of the most famous

Elijah is then exposed to that most famous of all biblical spectacles. A storm is let loose, and its mighty winds break the very rocks but: *lo beruach Hashem.* Then there comes an earthquake, and after that a fire, but: *lo bera'ash Hashem, lo be'esh Hashem.* After this Elijah hears *kol demamah dakah* – the sound of gentle stillness. He wraps his mantle about his face, and God repeats the question: *mah lekha poh Eliyahu?* Elijah is not moved. He repeats the same answer, and reiterates the same impatience and

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disappointment with the Children of Israel. At this, God orders the prophet to go back to Damascus and get on with his business. ~~mission~~ ^{Mission}

A strange scene, indeed a mysterious one, that leaves us full of questions. Yet a rabbi can identify with it! Those of us who have been in the practical rabbinate for a while can no doubt empathize with the forlorn prophet, ^{Contemporary} ~~of many other many centuries ago~~ ^{Contemporary}

I know, because I felt it and often feel it again. If I were in the rabbinate today I would see Elijah's disappointments and frustrations as ^{my very own} mine. How often an idealistic young rabbi thinks: Here I am, having declined other and easier and more lucrative occupations, and I have dedicated myself to the rabbinate, which means God and Torah and *Klal Yisrael*. I can say with the prophet, in my own way, *kano kineiti la Hashem Tzeva'ot*. Without zeal and devotion and idealism I never would have undertaken this as my life's work.

Yet, what is my reward for all this? *Ki'azvu beritka benei Yisrael*, "for the Children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant." I am preaching a doctrine that they do not want to hear, and teaching a lesson that they do not want to learn, and selling an item they do not want to buy! When sociologists take the statistics of demography and intermarriage, and punch them into their sophisticated computers, and are told and tell us that if things continue in this way, that American Jewry will in a hundred years be down from five and a half million to some nine hundred thousand or may even ten thousand—that means that Israel has abandoned the covenant. So who needs me?

Et mitzbechotekha harasu — Jews have overturned the altar. Under the guise of a misguided modernism, and the impress of a muddle-headed liberationism, they have destroyed *kedushat Beit ha-Knesset* by tearing down the *mechitzot*, opening the parking lots on Shabbat, counting women in the ^{minyan}, transforming the nature of the rabbinate, and enshrining ignorance in the ark. When shall the prophet prophesy and when shall the rabbi teach—if *mitzbechotekha harasu* — if *halakhah* is treated with contempt, if tradition is branded as Neanderthal, if Shabbat is desecrated, if there are no shuls where sanctity is observed and revered?

Ve'et nevi'kha haragu be'charev, va'ivater ani levadi va-yevakshu et nafshi lekachtah: Thy prophets they killed with a sword, and I remain alone, and they sought my soul to take it away." What use is there in continuing a struggle that is doomed; when congregations eject loyal rabbis with impunity because they refuse to bend the knee to the *Ba'alim* of suburban America? When school boards reveal an aggressively abysmal ignorance of what Jewish education of children is all about; when a rabbi, tired and weary of the constant friction and misunderstanding and confrontation, feels so painfully alone, so dreadfully lonely, so socially ostracized and spiritually isolated? *va-Yevakshu et nafshi lekachtah*! Of what use is it to be a rabbi, even if they raise my salary and buy me a car and send me and my wife to

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Israel, if they seek to suck out my very *nefesh* by denying me those spiritual triumphs and satisfactions for which, and for alone, I became a Rav in the first place?

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(6) And yet, our own outbursts leave us unfulfilled. The catharsis of venting our feelings and seeking to end it all is incomplete. We know in our bones what our conscience hears loud and clear: *mak lekha poh Eliyahu*, what are you doing here? Why are you complaining? Maybe you didn't try hard enough. Maybe you do not have the moral warrant to climb into a cave and vent your spleen again our fellow Jews.

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h So, we determine to make a last, all-out effort. We become dramatic and heroic. We pull out all the plugs. We call mass meetings and we lead rallies and we organize demonstrations—whether for Israel or against the PLO, whether for Russian Jews or against *chillul Shabbat*. We precipitate communal confrontations with Federations and Center and non-Orthodox temples. We fly into battle fearlessly, and we make a great deal of noise. And the result is—hardly anything. *Lo be'ruach Hashem, lo be'ra'ash Hashem, lo be'esh Hashem*. And again the *kol demamah dakah* penetrates our conscience and asks; *mak lekha poh Eliyahu*? But we give the same answers. We vent our frustrations and our anger and our impatience and our bitterness. And all we get, finally, is an apparent non-sequitur—“Go to Syria!” *Lekh shuv le'darkekha Damesek!*

What does all this mean? I suggest that if the hints in this passage are analyzed correctly, they will yield a message of overarching importance for the contemporary Elijahs suffering the same symptoms of spiritual distress and personal unhappiness. ~~as the original prophet~~ original prophesy

Let me list a few of these hints: there is a trip of forty days and forty nights; the action takes place at Mount Horeb-Sinai; the locales are desert, a mountaintop, and a cave; there is a theophany accompanying a series of divinely produced natural outbursts of sound and fire and fury; there is a covering of the face and a reluctance to look; and there is, of course, an irrepressible anger at the obstinate, backsliding, disobedient Jews, and an impatience with their spiritual immaturity. It should be obvious by now that we hear in this passage the echoes of the career of Moshe Rabbeinu. The locations, the time, the setting, and the psychological reactions are all there.

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10 Then there is another set of clues – two, to be specific: the story begins in Beersheba and ends in Damascus, Syria. These two areas are the loci that define the historic mission of our Father Abraham.

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I suggest that Providence is teaching the prophet about his own mission, his own task on earth. Elijah is faced with two great historical archetypes of Jewish leadership, that of Moses and of Abraham. Moses, during his first sojourn at Mount Sinai, symbolizes the drama, the power, the spectacle that accompanies divine revelation. He is the impatient leader who, much as he loves his people, cannot

Aspiring
Aspiring

This, I submit, is the Torah's message for young spiritual leaders of our times: every prophet, every Jewish leader, must alternate between Abraham and Moses, using either one as circumstances dictate. Do not allow yourself to cross the threshold of frustration too readily. Do not rant and rave against Jews who fail to respond to your idealistic self-sacrifice. Do not put your trust in the shock-action of demonstrations and rallies and mass meetings only. Do not crawl into a cave and lament your bitter fate and look around for another profession while there is still time. Tough it out. Be prepared for a long and arduous journey. Know that in the rabbinate the one thing you must never expect is gratitude. Do not demand or expect that people will appreciate either your learning or your loyalty. And yet, love them because they are your brothers and sisters, pray for them and with them no matter how low they sink, for father Abraham did the same for people far worse than they. Do not act only as if you are at the climax of a great endeavor, as was Moses at Sinai; instead, imagine too that you are at the beginning of a long adventure, as was Abraham. Act with fortitude and with forbearance, and if the call of *lekh lekha* takes you away from home and your family and the spiritual comforts of your life in yeshiva, follow your vocation happily and lovingly, secure in the knowledge that ultimately it will lead you into the Promised Land of a Jewish community firm in its commitment to Torah and to the *Ribono Shel Olam*.

Always keep both archetypes before you: Moses, who summoned his people to return to the ways of the *Avot*, who attempted to restore *lev banim al avotam*; and Abraham who, beginning without precedent, and nurturing his vision of a future of *emunah ba-Hashem*, tried to move his generation in the direction that his and their children would ultimately take: *lev avot al banim*.

So, my message to you—those charged with the sacred obligation of continuing the historic tradition of Jewish spiritual leadership which began with Father Abraham and continued through Moses and Elijah—is to choose carefully the appropriate model for your specific condition. Above all, do not despair but be of good courage and take heart. Know that in your congregations and schools there are unexplored islands of human goodness and tenderness, uncharted resources of Jewish love and loyalty and commitment, undiscovered treasures of yearning for Torah and tradition. Never give up on a single Jew! Know that as rabbanim you represent a tradition more ancient than that of medicine, more sacred than that of law, more noble than that of commerce and trade. Know that you are but the latest link in a chain that contains the greatest luminaries in the history of our ancient people, and that the masorah is committed into your hands for safekeeping and transmission to those who will follow you. And know, above all, that your yeshivah stands behind you, your roshei yeshivah stand beside you, and the ideals of Torah you learned here stand before you – to keep you company in your loneliness, to allay your apprehensions, to mitigate your frustrations, to enhance your courage, and to recharge you with the inspiration to succeed, despite all obstacles, in the marvelous and wondrous tasks which you have undertaken to transform a mere congregation to a *kehilah kedoshah*, a mere school to a *makom Torah*, and the Jewish community to the *am Hashem*.

Hinei Anokhi sholei'ach lakhem et Eliyahu ha-navi lifnei boy'om Hashem ha-gadol ve'ha-nora; ve'heishiv
lev avot al banim al avotan.

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