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Celebrating a Life at Yeshiva: An Interview With Norman Lamm

As this marks Rabbi Dr. Lamm's final year as president of Yeshiva University, the Observer editors spoke to Rabbi Lamm about his accomplishments as president of the University, how the University has changed, where he sees the University is headed, and what message he would like to leave the students.

Observer Editors: What do you view as your greatest accomplishment as the president of YU for the past 27 years?

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm: From one point of view, considering the difficult earlier years, the greatest accomplishment was survival—for me and for the University. The colleges and RIETS are on a much more firm financial basis. There is no comparison to where we were when I came in and we were talking about chapter eleven, going bankrupt. *Baruch Hashem*, we were saved from that disaster.

There are things that I did that, while I am pleased that I did them, I wish I could have done more. I think the improvement of the undergraduate colleges is important. The Honors programs have added to the intellectual level of conversation in the classroom. They have been able to attract more gifted students. We have more students coming in now than ever before. I am pleased with the *kollelim* we have established at RIETS. I am pleased with Stern College, especially with the strengthening of the school as the years go by—and the same is true of Yeshiva College and Sy Syms.

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Other than that I consider my most significant accomplishment is a much greater awareness of and commitment to Torah U'madda on behalf of the student body.

OE: Can you describe the greater commitment to Torah U'madda that you've witnessed over the years?

NL: It is a more explicit one. It is more articulated. Before I came in, people didn't talk about it. They questioned it, but didn't look for or wait for any answers. They called it a "synthesis" in those days. They didn't talk about it. No one really knew what it meant, except in a very general way. Today we have the Torah U'madda project, Torah U'madda publications, and there's a great deal of talk about it. Students debate it, they criticize it, they approve of it. Whatever it may be, they are more aware of what we are all about, and that is terribly important to the identity of the University.

OE: Considering all of the recent talk of polarization on campus, it's interesting that you see a greater commitment to Torah U'madda. How would you respond to claims, such as those of journalist Naomi Schafer, that YU as a symbol of modern Orthodoxy will cease to exist within 20 years?

NL: I quote the Talmud. "From the time the *Beis Hamikdash* was destroyed, prophecy was taken away from the prophets and given to fools." So, on the contrary, of course we have problems. We are a living institution. People who are alive have problems. People who are dead have no problems whatsoever. We

are a live institution...Of course we have problems, because we are a school that stands for something. We have a clear idea—or several clear ideas—of what and where we are. There does not have to be only one *peirush*, one interpretation of Torah U'madda, but Torah U'madda is basically what we are all about. That's what Dr. Belkin stood for, that's what the Rav stood for, and that's what most of us here stand for.

OE: You mentioned problems. What do you see as the greatest challenge for Yeshiva University in the next five to ten years?



Rabbi Lamm at a recent farewell party organized and attended by students leaders

NL: To maintain the integrity of the university. The graduate schools and the undergrad schools should be working more in tandem. RIETS and the University should be working more in tandem, and it's very important that the student body should feel a sense of unity in recognizing that it's not monochromatic, that it's not homogenous, but that doesn't matter. You can have people with different perceptions, but we're all part of one organism. And that is a problem, not so much at Stern as it is uptown, and that has to be conquered, and it has to be dealt with deliberately. I think there are social problems that need to be taken care of. I am not pleased with the current social setup of young men meeting young women...I think the new ways of doing things are not necessarily the best. We have to encourage different kind of systems, which will be more natural, of course, always in keeping with halakha, unquestionably. A lot of changes have to take place because we always have to improve.

OE: What kind of changes?

NL: The present system leaves a lot to be desired. Some of the rules that someone has made up—and no one knows where they came from—are utterly ridiculous. Some of the conduct is unbecoming. For example, you go to a wedding and you invite your friends—single men and single women—and you seat them at tables at opposite ends of the wedding hall. So here is the perfect place to meet each other, and you blow it away.

OE: Some people think the Roshei Yeshiva are responsible for encouraging this kind of behavior. Would you agree?

NL: On the contrary. I thought so until I talked to them and they actually agreed

to give shiurim and invited boys and girls. But the better boys didn't come—the boys who think they are better didn't come—and the girls who think they're better didn't come, and so the whole thing deteriorated. We have to stop this attitude. The Roshei Yeshiva have tried to do it but they have been unsuccessful. The Roshei Yeshiva want to be the hosts of having boys and girls together for good purposes, for a lecture, for Torah and *chesed*. That's the natural way of doing things instead of following some arcane rules that are both irrational and unreasonable.

OE: We know you're staying on next

year as Rosh Hayeshiva, as part of a momentous split between the presidency and the position of Rosh Hayeshiva. How do you envision your relationship with Mr. Joel?

NL: That remains to be seen. He will be the president—that is clear. I will try to help out as much as I can. As I told him, I will give him as much help as he wants, not less, but also not more. It's his show. But I'll be around to help, to offer guidance to whoever wants it. I hope to have more time for interacting with the students.

OE: As students at Stern College, we have not had much interaction with you over the years. How do you view the president's relationship with Stern College?

NL: There is a problem. Geography does count, after all. It counts psychologically. When I first came to the presidency I decided I was going to give time to every school. Sooner or later, I discovered that there is so much to do for the University as a whole that I can't be with students as much as I want to. Mr. Joel has said that he will be with students, and I wish him well. But as time goes on, one has to prioritize his time in accordance with the urgency of the things that are making demands on him. I don't know how much Mr. Joel will be able to do in terms of getting closer to Stern. I hope he can. I hope to do whatever I can to help in any way. I have come down to speak at Stern every now and then, and the number of people who came was not terribly significant. But I agree that there is a great deal to be done in getting the Stern students more aware of the fact that there is a University as well as getting the University to know that there is a Stern College.

OE: Perhaps the poor attendance

serves as an illustration of the problem. Students at Stern College don't even know who the president of their university is.

NL: That is true. But then again, I asked my wife, who is a graduate of Hunter, who the president was in her day, and she didn't know. At most schools they don't know. Yeshiva is a much more intimate school so we expect to be on a first name basis, but it really can't be done quite as much as students like and quite as much as they deserve.

I am enormously fond of Stern College. Dean Bacon was the first dean appointment I made when I became president and I am very very pleased with her performance. You have a very good faculty, better than ever before. You have a vibrant student body, which always complains that there is not enough volunteerism. We sometimes forget that many of the students are from New York or the metropolitan area so there is generally not that much participation, but there should be much more...It's a great school, and we're very proud of it.

OE: Is there one fond memory or funny story that stands out in your mind during your tenure as president of the University?

NL: August 1976, the beginning of my tenure as president. In September school started and I decided I would eat lunch with the students, so I went down to the cafeteria, took my tray and went to the cashier. There were three levels of price—student, faculty and outsider. The cashier looked at me and said, "You're not a student, are you?" I said 'No.' "Are you a faculty member?" I said, 'No.' She said, "Then you're an outsider." I said 'No.' She cried

"There's a creative tension at Yeshiva. I would be very unhappy if everyone agreed with everyone else."

out, "Oh, so you're a nobody?" The manager of the cafeteria came running over, he was so upset. I pacified him. That was a funny incident that I always recall with pleasure.

OE: Do you have a parting message you would like to leave the students?

NL: Be proud of your school. We're not perfect, but no one is perfect. We are proud of you, you're not perfect. We all are there for a common cause. It's a sacred cause. Torah U'madda is a *derech* of *avodas Hashem*, and we all ought to be fond of each other and supportive of each other even if we have different opinions. Let's not worry about these different opinions: having them makes this place much more alive. If everyone is of the same opinion, it's deadly boring. We're alive. There's a creative tension at Yeshiva. I would be very unhappy if everyone agreed with everyone else. It means we have to have a sense of unity even though there is disagreement. We have to agree to disagree agreeably. That's what makes us a different kind of school, a different kind of institution, and a very important one for the Jewish world and the Jewish future.

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm's retirement culminates his over 50-year involvement with Yeshiva University, which began in 1945 when Dr. Lamm entered Yeshiva College as an 18-year-old freshman, majoring in chemistry. He received his rabbinical ordination from RIETS in 1951 and a Ph.D. from the Bernard Revel Graduate School in Jewish philosophy in 1966.

"[Yeshiva University] was a home—intellectually, spiritually, academically, and psychologically," Dr. Lamm said in March

2001 when he announced his retirement.

Since assuming the position of president of Yeshiva University in 1976, Dr. Lamm has been integral to the University's academic development and physical growth. Dr. Lamm saved the school from bankruptcy in 1980, and under his leadership YU's endowment increased from \$25 million in 1986 to \$930 million in 2002.

Staunchly committed to the cornerstone of the university, Torah U'madda, Dr. Lamm often stressed the primacy of

the University's philosophy. "The beauty of Yeshiva, the source of its uniqueness, lies in its planned and deliberate diversity. We are both Yeshiva and University, both Torah and *Madda*. And the encounter of one with the other is what sends off sparks—dynamic, creative, fiery sparks, sparks that illuminate and enlighten," Dr. Lamm said at Yeshiva's annual Hanukkah Dinner in 2001.

Aside from his accomplishments at Yeshiva, Dr. Lamm is internationally recognized for his many published books and

dozens of articles. His writings and teaching on Jewish law have been cited in two landmark decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1966 and 1967.

Dr. Lamm and his wife Mindy have four children and 17 grandchildren.



Rabbi Lamm, 1949 YC yearbook photo