

FORWARD, MARCH 16, 2001

Lamm Steps Down

When Rabbi Norman Lamm retires next year as president of Yeshiva University, he will leave a gaping hole, not only in his institution but in the broader American Jewish community. During his quarter-century tenure he increased the university's endowment 35-fold, expanded its graduate schools and firmly established it in the top ranks of American universities. Despite pressure from Orthodoxy's right wing he kept the university committed to its twin tenets of Torah study and free academic inquiry and maintained its status as the flagship of Orthodoxy's modern wing. By force of example and through quiet persuasion he fought to keep Modern Orthodoxy from drifting into the arms of the right and breaking ties with Judaism's more liberal wings.

Critics argue, with justice, that Rabbi Lamm was only partly successful in stemming the rightward drift. Many fault him for not rising up as a charismatic voice of Modern Orthodoxy in the mold of the movement's late sage, Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik. In recent years Rabbi Lamm's behind-the-scenes responses to crises were derided as "the silences of Lamm."

The criticisms are correct, but also unfair. A modest, scholarly man, Rabbi Lamm emerged by default as Modern Orthodoxy's de facto leader, as a dying Rabbi Soloveitchik faded from the scene. The years since then have been marked by growing alienation between left and right in Judaism around the world. To blame any one figure for failing to hold the center is fatuous.

Those who know Rabbi Lamm value the role he has played as a gentle force for reason and decency in a world that knows too little of either. May his strength increase.