



Yeshiva University President Rabbi Norman Lamm has deftly straddled the fault lines of American Orthodoxy for a quarter of a century. Finding someone to fill his shoes won't be easy, reports **Julie Wiener**



For 25 years, Rabbi Norman Lamm has been not only the president of Yeshiva University, but the unofficial president of modern Orthodoxy in America.

Both the university and this wing of Orthodoxy have a mission of "*Torah umada*" – literally, Torah and science – balancing Jewish learning and strict adherence to Jewish law with engagement in the world at large.

Now with Lamm, 73, having announced recently his plans to retire next year as president of Yeshiva University, the direction of both that institution and modern Orthodoxy in general is somewhat unclear.

Finding a successor will be a challenge. With Orthodoxy becoming increasingly factionalized, observers say it will be difficult to find someone who shares Lamm's combination of rabbinic and academic credentials – he has degrees in both chemistry and Jewish philosophy – and his ability to raise funds.

Compounding the uncertainty about modern Orthodoxy's future is the fact that its other major institution in the United States – the Orthodox Union – is also seeking to replace its top professional. The individuals who replace Lamm and the OU's Rabbi Raphael Butler – who resigned in late January in the wake of a tremendous scandal – will have a major influence on the character of modern Orthodoxy.

Jonathan Sarna, the Braun Professor of Jewish History at Brandeis University, said that regardless of their position on the ideological spectrum, the incoming leaders of Yeshiva University and the Orthodox Union "are going to face some very substantial challenges" because "Orthodoxy's era of triumphalism is probably coming to a close."

In a recent article in the journal *Sh'ma*, Sarna, who belongs to a modern Orthodox synagogue, argues that Orthodoxy's future in North America is threatened by a "severe leadership crisis," a "brain drain" to Israel and sharp divisions between right-wing and left-wing factions over how to confront modernity.

But on Lamm's watch, both Orthodoxy in general and Yeshiva University in particular have seen considerable growth. In addition to its rabbinical seminary and undergraduate programs serving Orthodox Jews, YU also is a non-sectarian institution with prestigious graduate schools in areas such as law and medicine. Lamm is widely praised for rescuing YU from financial disaster, for being an articulate and inspiring speaker and for increasing the university's enrollment and prestige.

But Orthodoxy and its flagship institution also have faced serious tensions and splits during Lamm's tenure, primarily in balancing secular and Jewish values. YU has faced competing demands from the academic faculty and the leaders of religious instruction at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, which ordains approximately 35 to 40 rabbis each year.

Tensions flared recently over clubs for gay students – and whether to allow same-sex couples to live in married-student housing – in the nonsectarian graduate schools.

Some on Orthodoxy's right wing say Lamm has not imposed a strong-enough Orthodox imprint on the university and say he went "too far" by creating an advanced Talmud program for women. Talmud study has been traditionally reserved for men.

On the other side of the ideological spectrum are modern-Orthodox leaders disappointed that Lamm distanced himself from Edah, a fledgling, left-leaning organization whose motto is "the courage to be modern and Orthodox."

IN THE past two years, two rival rabbinical seminaries have opened in New York – Lander College and Yeshiva Chovevei Torah, on the right and left of Orthodoxy, respectively – because of the perception that YU no longer met their constituents' needs.

Some critics say that the secular, or "mada," and Judaic, or "Torah," faculties at YU barely communicate with each other.

Because of the balancing act Lamm's position requires in serving such divergent constituencies, some speculate that he will be replaced with two people: one to oversee YU's secular academic side and one to oversee Judaic study.

But Lamm believes dividing the position in two is not a desirable solution. One person should fill the presidency "to symbolize what the university stands for: Torah umada," he says. "This position requires a balancing act," he said. "And you can't balance if you have two personalities – it's difficult enough as one person."

Among the names being floated as possible successors to Lamm are Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, chief rabbi of Efrat, an Israeli settlement near Jerusalem; Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, chief Orthodox rabbi of England; and Rabbi Jacob Schacter, founding dean of the Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik Institute in suburban Boston.

Lamm would not confirm that they are indeed candidates. The differences and tensions YU faces are not as severe as many charge, he says.

"There are differences of opinion, but it is only organizations where everyone is unthinking that have a uniformity of opinion."

Lamm disagrees with those who say that YU, particularly its rabbinic school and undergraduate program, has moved steadily to the right during his tenure.

"If by the right, one means greater dedication to the study and analysis of Torah, then we are to the right and I welcome it. If by right you mean we're benighted Neanderthals and provincials and people who hate everyone else, no absolutely not," he continues. "Are there some individuals who qualify for such opprobrium? Yes, and some have left. But for the greater part, the [heads of the Judaic program] are dedicated, brilliant people and are rational people, and entitled to their

own opinions and nuances."

Among the issues dividing modern Orthodox Jews in recent years have been the extent to which they should cooperate with the more liberal streams of Judaism, support secular academic pursuits as well as religious learning, and embrace efforts to give women a larger role in Jewish learning and worship.

The movement also faces smaller and more tangible issues, and all can be felt at YU.

Reflecting their stance on the ideological spectrum, modern Orthodox Jews wear different types of yarmulkas – ranging from black velvet favored by those more fervently Orthodox to colorful knitted ones and there are even those who wear no yarmulka at all except in synagogue.

Differences also are reflected in the stringency with which people interpret aspects of Jewish law such as modesty requirements. Some modern Orthodox women wear only long skirts, while others wear pants or other more revealing clothing. Among married women in the community, some wear wigs or hats, while others do not cover their hair.

Even the term "modern Orthodox" has proven controversial, with many rejecting "modern" for "centrist," and others preferring no modifier at all.

Lamm, who uses the two interchangeably, says he initially shifted from "modern" to "centrist" several years ago because he did not like the assumption that "what is modern is always good."

"But then centrist was misunderstood to mean some mathematical point evenly between Neturei Karta – the small, fervently Orthodox sect that is militantly anti-Zionist – and Reform. Therefore I use both terms, each one to cancel out the weakness of the other." But he adds, "I think eventually, I will settle on modern."

RABBI Saul Berman, a professor at YU's Stern College, co-founder of the new, more liberal Chovevei Torah seminary and director of Edah, said the openings within the OU and YU are an opportunity "for the lay and rabbinic leadership to redefine the direction in which the institutions of the modern Orthodox community are going to be moving over the next quarter of a century, if not longer."

The positions the new leaders take, on issues like how Orthodoxy relates to the broader Jewish community, will have a great impact, Berman says.

It remains to be seen whether anyone will be able to walk the kind of tightrope Lamm has. Rabbi Yosef Blau, the *mashgiach ruchani* – spiritual guidance counselor – at YU's rabbinic seminary, believes Lamm's overall record was positive.

"The vast majority of [rabbis] if you'd ask them, would say yes, over the years they thought Rabbi Lamm was weak on this issue or that issue," Blau says. "But if you look back at the total picture and see how Yeshiva University has grown and developed, including the rabbinical school, he balanced all the pressures really well." (JTA)