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RABBI NORMAN LAMM

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DEDICATION ADDRESS - CONGREGATION KODIMOH  
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I am very grateful for the gracious extravagance with which I have been introduced and the charming overstatement of the tribute paid to me. However, I believe that no tribute is very persuasive at this hour. It always seems to be my fate to rise to speak after 11:30 - whether Saturday morning or Sunday night, when people are in a hurry either to get home to eat or home to sleep.

I am of course delighted to be here with you. The years that I spent here were precious ones in my life and that of my family. Coming here is indeed a homecoming.

Your building is breathtakingly beautiful. The simplicity of the design, the beauty and elegance of the lines, the exquisiteness of the appointment<sup>s</sup> are a tribute to your devoted labors. Many a speaker has said that this represents a fulfillment of your dreams. I must take exception to these remarks. Those of us who were in at the beginning of the building drive know very well that our dreams were quite modest compared to this achievement. Never, even in our wildest moments, did we allow ourselves to think of such a beautiful structure for Kodimoh! No, this reality exceeds over and over again even the fondest dreams and hopes that we entertained.

I see in this result not only esthetic excellence, but also the mark of individual personalities and the impressions of devotion, selflessness, and self sacrifice.

The Ba<sup>a</sup>il Shem Tov once said of a synagogue, that he could see the walls creeping with souls. I can say the same thing of this beautiful new synagogue. I see more than brick and beams and panels. I see the walls creeping with souls. We are surrounded here by precious memories of people who, like King David, saw visions of a temple built to G-d, but were not privileged to live



to see its completion. First and foremost amongst them, is the soul of Louis Katz, that grand old man of Kodimoh, who was the inspiration for this building. It was in August 1957 that a young Rabbi was being rowed around a lake in Otis, Massachusetts, by an old man called Louis Katz. It was in that row boat that he promised me to initiate the building campaign which tonight has been brought to a successful climax. There are the souls of that forthright man, A. J. Saffer, and that rough, uncut diamond, Sam Belsky, as genuine a man as ever walked the face of the earth. And many more.

And - may they be distinguished for long life - this building is an embodiment of the selfless labors of such people as Dr. Izenstein, who has managed to combine an eminently successful medical practice with the Presidency of this congregation; Irving Cohen, who has done likewise with one of the finest law practices in Mass.; people like Nathan Goldstein, who like a good movies man is a man of action; Isidore Strick, with his gentle and modest approach that is so attractive to all of us; and Maurice Elion with his farnem, and his sense of bigness.

And in <sup>involving</sup> completing the leaders and guides of this congregation, we ought not overlook the contributions made by the small people - those whom G-d has not endowed with much substance or ability to lead in such a campaign. As long as you gave according to your ability - in all honesty - then you, too, are an integral part of this building. I recently read of the story of Rabbi Yechezkel Sarna, the head of the famous Yeshiva of Hebron, who received some very small amount of money from an old lady who would go around the streets of Jerusalem begging coins for the upkeep of the Yeshiva. Someone in the office of the Rabbi said to him, "don't you think the Yeshiva can exist without such contributions?" "Yes," said Rabbi Sarna, "the Yeshiva can exist without such contributions; but the world cannot."

The same is true of whatever was done in this campaign by people for whom this represented the maximum of their ability. Perhaps the synagogue could have been built without your assistance; but Kodimoh would not be Kodimoh without you. It is the nature of our entire congregation that it has always been composed of individuals who are respected for what they are rather than what they have.



And yet the greatest accomplishment of which all of you can boast tonight is not in the funds you have raised or the building you have erected. It is psychological in nature. When we began, some five years ago, our major difficulties <sup>were</sup> ~~was~~ not financial, important as that was. It was, rather, that this congregation was suffering from a crippling inferiority complex. To be a member of Kodimoh meant not to wear a badge of pride, but to be burdened with a sense of guilt and inadequacy. Our leadership as well as our membership went around with the idea that we can't do it. Thank G-d that is no longer the case - and proof of that fact is that now you hardly even remember that you had such a complex!

Nevertheless, as much as has been accomplished for the building, much remains to be done. You are beset by a large debt, and more will yet be added to it. Your leaders will be back at you for more. I recall the story of a colleague who was appealing for funds from his congregation in order to renovate the building. A particularly wealthy but miserly man, sitting in the middle of the congregation, announced a pledge of \$25.00, to the disappointment of everyone. Whereupon, a miracle occurred and a piece of the peeling ceiling fell down upon his head. In the dramatic silence that followed he raised his hand and said, "I raise my pledge to \$100.00." At that, the Rabbi was heard muttering under his breath, "O G-d, hit him again!"

So too, my friends, you will be hit again and again and again. And I pray to G-d that you will respond - again and again and again.

Accept, therefore, my profoundest congratulations on this wonderful piece of work. In the words of Moses, when he saw the Tabernacle erected for the first time, <sup>וַיִּבְרָא</sup> <sup>וַיִּבְרָא</sup> <sup>וַיִּבְרָא</sup> - may it be G-d's will that His spirit rest upon the work of your hands. May you and your children and your children's children for many generations be privileged to celebrate only happy events and draw great spiritual sustenance and comfort within these walls.

And yet I would be less than honest if I told you that the building is all there is to Kodimoh, and that with this you may consider your tasks completed and offer yourselves congratulations. When the writer of the Second Book of Kings described the dedication



of the first Temple that Solomon had built, he described in some detail the wonderful pomp and circumstance, the ceremoniousness and festivities that mark that historic day in Jewish life. And yet he added one sobering verse which pointed out the real significance of the whole event: *וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁכַּח אֶת-הָאֵלֹהִים וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁכַּח אֶת-הָאֵלֹהִים* - "there was in the ark only the two stone tablets that Moses had placed in it at Horeb (Sinai)." All the festivities - the multitude of sacrifices "which could not be counted because there were so many," the singing Levites, the milling crowds, the cheering masses, the smoke-filled chambers, the sense of elation that electrically spread through the crowd - all this was meaningless to the point of insignificance if one forgot the Torah which was the reason for this Temple. So it is with us. Our dedication exercises we experienced today were very impressive. But much more impressive is the message of Kodimoh borne by the Torah in the Ark. It is that to which we must dedicate ourselves. It is that which is abiding and eternal, and for whose greater glory this structure has been erected. If we remember that Torah, then our happiness and our festivities are acceptable in the eyes of the Lord. If, Heaven forbid, we neglect those two stone tablets, then all our festivities are a mockery and an exercise in futility.

Unfortunately, this has often seemingly been forgotten by American Jewry. Our fellow Jews have too often been obsessed with the "edifice complex," with substituting "activities" for true Jewish religious experience. If the rabbis, past and present, of Kodimoh are happy with you today and join in the spirit of joy and cheer, it is because we are confident that Kodimoh will not go the way of all synagogues and centers, but will remain loyal and true to its real mission.

But this loyalty has not always been present. Many centuries ago, the prophet Joel described a scene in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem which is strange indeed. He writes,

*וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁכַּח אֶת-הָאֵלֹהִים וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁכַּח אֶת-הָאֵלֹהִים* - between the ulam, the lobby or hall, and the mizbeiah, the altar or room where the sacred service took place, there will the priests cry. And they will turn to Almighty G-d and pray, *וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁכַּח אֶת-הָאֵלֹהִים וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁכַּח אֶת-הָאֵלֹהִים* - "have mercy O Lord on Thy people... why shall the nations say, 'where is their G-d?'"



What does he mean? Why, of all places, should the priests weep on the border line between the ulam and mizbeiah indeed, why should they weep at all?

Permit me to say that Joel was a prophet not only for his age but for our age as well. It is in our day, even more than <sup>in</sup> his, that the Priest or religious leaders or rabbis have much to weep about; and the main cause of their weeping is that we begin to wonder if our people can distinguish between the ulam and the mizbeiah. We wonder: where does the loyalty of our people lie - in the ulam or the mizbeiah, the social hall or the sanctuary? When our congregations erect these magnificent structures, what do they really intend to do: pay homage to G-d, or show off to their neighbors? Celebrate banquets or benedictions? - Emphasize prayers or parties, pulpit or platform, dinnim or dinners, services or socials, "Bar" or "Mitzvah," the sacred or the secular - ulam or the mizbeiah? We sometimes turn in frustration to Almighty G-d and ask Him for His mercy and compassion, because "why should the nations say 'where is their God?'" - because Gentiles often behold the spectacle of our divided loyalties, and wonder: are these Jews really a religious people, or are they to be equated with agnostics, atheists, professional secularists? And woe is to us if the nations of the world no longer know for sure whether our hearts and our minds and our souls lie in the ulam or in the mizbeiah. That is why religious leadership of America, at least the conscientious and dedicated religious leadership, stands on that thin dividing line between the social hall and the sanctuary and prays and weeps and prays and weeps. The tragedy is that all too often, those who are possessed of a mizbeiah lack the physical facilities of an ulam, and those whom G-d had endowed with a magnificent ulam have no conception of the mizbeiah. It is a tragedy that Yeshivot and institutions of higher learning must often undergo all kinds of humiliation and indignity in order to make ends meet, while well-endowed organizations, dripping with money, often futilely go searching for a cause.

Kodimoh is blessed, because it remembers its mission. Kodimoh is blessed because it will remain true to that symbolic act which took place this afternoon: the procession of a Torah scrolls from the old to the new Kodimoh, representing for all the



future the fact that a new building does not mean a change in values, that the same sacred tradition which informed us and our ancestors in the old building will now be carried on to the generation that will follow. Let the word go out from here to all the world, that modern Orthodoxy knows where it stands; that it shall not be a cause for the weeping of the men of faith and religion; that we can have both the ulam and the mizbeiah, and yet understand full well that our main emphasis must always be on the sanctuary, the altar, the mizbeiah; that while we should always attempt to enshrine our principles in the proper ulam or quarters, a beautiful building is only a means to a higher end, only a tool and an implement with which to effect the great visions of prophets and seers and Rabbis, of Torah and tradition. If you want proof of the ability of Kodimoh to assimilate both the social hall and the sanctuary without losing its sense of balance, look at the wonderful record you have achieved with your young people, the Bnei Mitzvah Group; the roster of least fourteen or fifteen young people who now attend Yeshiva University in its various departments; the large number of young people in other colleges who are practicing, observing Jews because of the influence that Kodimoh has had upon their lives. Your Rabbi can well stand between the ulam and the mizbeiah and, instead of weeping, proclaim his happiness and his satisfaction. And so may it be for years without end.

I shall close with a Hassidic "vort" on a famous talmudic passage. The Talmud quotes G-d as saying to Israel, open up to me your hearts the width of hudo shel mahat, the sharp point of a needle, and I shall open my heart to you as pitho shel ulam, as wide as a large hall. In other words, all I ask of you, says G-d, is a small effort, and I shall respond ~~expansively~~ expansively. Give me the width of a needle and I shall give you the width of an ulam. To which the great Kotzker Rabbi adds, yes only as wide as the opening of a needle, but - like a needle - "durch und durch," it must penetrate through and through, into the depths of your mind and heart and soul, deep into the very marrow of your bones and the bosom of your family.

This is my concluding word to you, my dearly beloved friends of Kodimoh. You have achieved this great and wonderful building. Now open up your hearts to G-d. Open up, if only as wide as a needle, but: deeply and thoroughly. Allow the message and the



traditions of Kodimoh to pierce to the very depths of your being, to bring the blessings of Torah deep into your individual personalities and into your families. And may G-d, in turn, open up for you a future as bright, as beautiful, as broad, as wide, as wonderful and as blessed as this very magnificent ulam or hall in which we are at this moment.

So may be His will, Amen.

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