

Modeling Torah Umadda

by Mark Gottlieb

The ubiquity of the slogan "*Torah Umadda*" in the environs of Yeshiva University needs little confirmation. It is the motto of our institution, and, as such, is emblazoned on a host of items, ranging from letterheads to coffee cups and paper napkins. Unfortunately, the immediacy of the slogan's presence often obscures the profound doctrinal implications of our *Yeshiva's* mission. Many students glibly toss the term around, not realizing that *Torah Umadda* is not simply a motto on a university seal, comparable to Yale's *lux et veritas*, for example, but rather a subtle, complex and serious *derekh ha-avoda*.

An unfamiliarity with the sources and conceptual underpinnings that support our basic approach seems to be the cause of the problem. For many, distinct versions within the general camp of those who assent to the value of secular knowledge remain hazy and amorphous. To correct this lacuna, Rabbi Lamm's highly anticipated new offering, *Torah Umadda: The Encounter of Religious Learning and Worldly Knowledge in the Jewish Tradition* provides a thoughtful and systematic presentation of several versions of *Torah Umadda* and their respective educational implications.

Rabbi Lamm is an eloquent stylist who employs his talents to successfully orchestrate a balance between scholarly precision and impassioned fervor. To be sure, Rabbi Lamm is no detached observer, and his approach is avowedly provocative. His approach is more "phenomenological than historical" and background material is marshalled to support a specific position. This is no mere exercise in intellectual gymnastics, as is so often the case with academic scholarship.

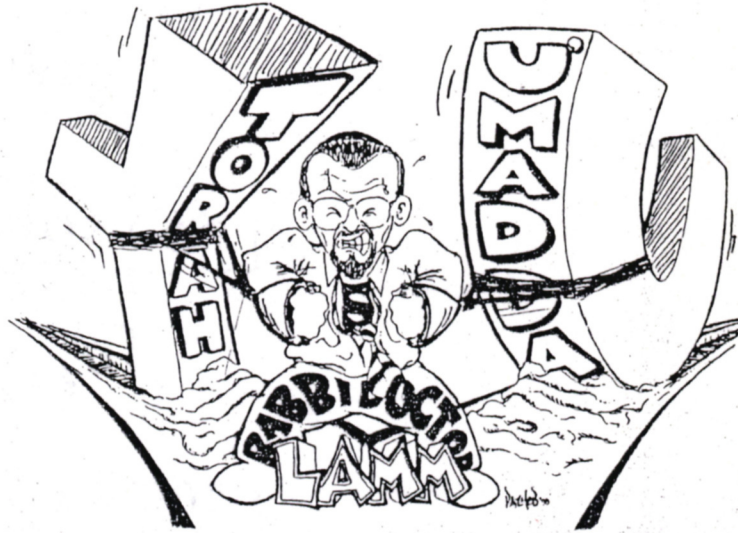
Before discussing the individual paradigms, Rabbi Lamm presents a brief historical survey of the opposition to *Torah Umadda*. Rabbi Lamm is fond of rhetorical flourish, and his nightmarish metaphor for the potential danger inherent in an insular, bifurcated lifestyle is quite effective. Also, Rabbi Lamm has a sharp insight into the teleology of mission of Israel's exilic odyssey, viz., only if we are a "holy nation and kingdom of priests," not a "sacred sect and denomination of priests," can we succeed as the agent of universal redemption — a light unto all nations.

The individual paradigms are presented in a rigorous fashion, and R. Lamm's analysis displays an undeniable clarity of thought. This is especially evident in his various critiques of the "Rationalist" model of Maimonides and the "Cultural" model of R.S.R. Hirsch. R. Lamm incisively remarks that invoking the Rationalist model in a contemporary

setting is of limited value, for Maimonides' assent to the value, indeed desirability, of secular learning was restricted to a static, now obsolete system — Aristotelian cosmology and metaphysics. R. Lamm's penetrating comparison of the Hirschian and Kookian systems serves to highlight the dichotomy of synthesis and coexistence. (For further discussion, the reader is directed to R. Lamm's "Two Versions of Synthesis" in *Faith and Doubt*. Also, for a thoughtful critique of R. Kook's

flows from the conviction that God is both the author of Creation, as well as Revelation. Rabbi Lamm utilizes the Chasidic doctrine of *avoda she-begashmiyut* — "worship through corporeality" — to bolster his thesis. This association is interesting, if not slightly problematic. If Rabbi Lamm is saying that any act can be transformed into "worship," even a mundane act such as tying a stitch on a shoe, provided that the requisite spiritual intention is present — namely the act is done

ous forces." Rabbi Lamm draws on an analogy from modern atomic physics — Bohr's theory of complementarity — to illustrate that pluralism is not only integral to the Halakhic system — "*elu va-elu divrei Elokim chayyim*" — but part of the very fabric of the universe. Theology, Mysticism, and Halakha all recognize that "reality requires apparently conflicting outlooks in order to grasp the underlying truth." This a subtle and profound insight which is neatly summed up



mystical monism, see R. Walter S. Wurzbarger's article in *Tradition* 1962.)

Next, R. Lamm proceeds to develop three fresh models of *Torah Umadda*. R. Lamm recognizes that these paradigms are not wholly new, but are based on previous models with slight modifications to add additional scope and emphasis. These attempts are bold and original, yet they are not immune from some slight difficulties. R. Lamm claims that the Inclusionary model is built on, yet surpasses, the Rationalist model in scope, for it is "content-neutral with regard to the nature of the *Madda* itself." However, we can only affirm *Madda* as "text-less *Torah*" if we appeal to the Rationalist model of the Rambam. Rambam admittedly limited his purview to the speculative metaphysics of his day and certainly can't be invoked in defense of the humanities. How the Inclusionary model salvages the temporality of the Rationalist model remains unclear.

The climax of the book is clearly the development of the Chasidic Model, which posits *Madda* as a form of worship. It is original and alluring in its attempt to imbue the totality of experience and Being with religious significance. This thesis naturally

"for the sake of heaven" (see Midrash Talpiyot on Enoch) — then we need not invoke the doctrine of "worship through corporeality" to defend the desirability or value of worldly knowledge. Worldly knowledge, per se, is not really valuable in its own right. What is valuable is the subjective "spiritual" intention. Some might argue that this trivializes the value of worldly knowledge, for it is no longer worthy in its own right. Also, the scope of the necessary intention is unclear. Does it have to be constant, or does a general assent to the value of nature and the world, based on God's immanence, suffice? Finally, the Chasidic model can be employed to give equal significance to other forms of experience, not just cognitive ones, such as athletic or aesthetic development. Rabbi Lamm rightfully recognizes the implications of his thesis, yet realizes that a systematic treatment of the non-cognitive faculties would go beyond the scope of the present work.

Rabbi Lamm concludes his work with an insightful discourse on the dialectical nature of truth and pluralism and his near-Utopian vision of a pluralistic Torah community. He eloquently "asserts the harmonious blending of the diverse and the resolution of autonomy-

in the coinage of the Catholic theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar: Truth is symphonic.

Those hoping to find a neat syllabus of required readings garnered from Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, or Kant, necessary to become an overnight "*Torah Umadda* Man" will be sorely disappointed. However, such a wish would be foolish and unrealistic. "*Torah Umadda*" is not simply a curricular desideratum. It is a demanding and complex religious system which requires the nourishment of an all-encompassing religious sensibility. It must never be restricted to the confines of a classroom. Rabbi Lamm clearly recognizes this fact, and therefore, his book is by no means programmatic. The odyssey of the individual *Torah Umadda* practitioner is intimate and personal. The realms of Nature, Knowledge, and Beauty are wide enough to accommodate the inclinations, interests, and affections of the sensitive practitioner. Rabbi Lamm does not spoon-feed us. Instead, he provides the necessary framework to enable each of us to develop and pursue the particular model suitable to our own needs and taste. *Torah Umadda* merits our praise, deserves our attention, and demands devotion to the ideal it espouses.