

204 Trelawney Estate,
Paragon Road,
London E.9.

21. 10. 69.

Dear Rabbi Lamm,

I would like to express my appreciation and heartfelt thanks for the articles that you have written in 'Tradition' during the last few years, which I came across about 4 months ago. I found in your articles an intense awareness of the spiritual problems that puzzle the modern Jew who, even if he is deeply committed, is still very conscious that there is much that has to be discussed and explained in the idiom of the age. The tenor of the articles in 'Tradition' in general, and your articles in particular, is one of intellectual and spiritual candour. They display an attempt to deal articulately and in depth with the implications and perplexities of being a Jew in a rapidly changing world. In short, making Torah relevant to modern living at every level. I would be most grateful if you could elaborate a little on the theme you developed in your article 'The Unity Theme - its implications'. I will return to the relevant point later on.

Perhaps, as background to my question, I should tell you a little about myself. I left high school five years ago at the age of 19 and, after much parental opposition, eagerly went to Gateshead Yeshiva. At that time I was very mixed up and thought that my new experience would be the panacea. I must admit that I did benefit from my stay in Yeshiva. I learnt some Talmud, made many friends and was exposed to an atmosphere of dedication and piety. But that is where it ended. I found instead of my doubts and questions diminishing, as I had been assured by many well-wishers, they became more numerous, searching and fundamental. I sometimes found that there was a sympathetic rapport between myself and the spiritual mentor, but when my questions became awkward he responded with the usual platitudes e.g. 'To the believers there are no questions, to the unbelievers are no answers', and 'What can a man know with his finite intellect; unaided reason can not get anywhere'. I must emphasise that I do not say that this approach is completely incorrect. It is, however, evasive and half true only. Of course, ultimately, man must have faith, since man's finite mind cannot fathom the Infinite, and there comes a point where one must say 'I just cannot understand this or that' and be content with humble faith. But surely there is much that still can be discussed before one capitulates and stops digging? I think it was the Baal Shem Tov who said that there is a world of difference between an infant who says it doesn't understand and the professor who admits he knows nothing.

When I went to Yeshiva many of my doubts were in the category that you label

'methodological' but as time proceeded they began to involve my very being and fell ~~xxx~~ into the 'substantive' category. The problems that really concerned me were :the nature of G-d, what He really is; what is man; what really is faith; the relationship between freedom (not base licentiousness) and utter conformity which orthodox Judaism seems to demand ect. ect. These topics were not just an academic exercise in definition; I was terribly concerned about them.

What really puzzled me and made me feel quite odd ~~xxx~~ was that there were many students in the Yeshiva, also with a secular background, who were cleverer than me and yet found complete spiritual satisfaction from the '4 amahs of Halakah'. When I began to discuss with them a few of the points I have mentioned, they looked at me aghast and expressed their wonderment that I should think about such ~~irreverent~~ irreverent and irrelevant subjects. Their attitude, to put it in secular terms, seems to me to be that Orthodox Judaism is basically theonomy and this alone is worthy of study. Speculation and discussion in depth on theology is strictly taboo.

Unable to get satisfaction from either staff or students, I turned to a number of Haskafah books. The Hafetz Hayim's writings were truly ethical, but irrelevant to my needs. Next was Rabbi E. Wasserman [3]. This saint~~xxx~~ had a highly developed Talmudic and Halakhic competence which I, in my abysmal ignorance, can not adequately describe. Yet, when it came to his discussion on religious themes and problems he was either ~~or~~ silent or just simple, almost naive. Perhaps I am using emotional words which colour the point I am making. The 'Truth' may be simple and because it is simple it does not mean it is wrong. But for me it just did not explain enough and took so many things for granted. I most sincerely believe that much more can be said, discussed and analysed before one comes to the border of the supra-rational.

Completely frustrated inside the Yeshiva, I looked outside for satisfaction. Surreptitiously during my dinner hours and on Friday afternoon I went along to the Gateshead reference library and there made my first encounter with Jung by reading his 'modern man in search of a soul'. I also came across writings of non Jewish religious writers as Radhakrishnan, and liberal/reform rabbis and Louis Jacobs. For the first time I realised that many of my questions and attitudes to life were considered by responsible intelligent thinkers to be worthy of discussion and consideration. Yet still I had somehow to relate their important insights to a commitment to Torah and Mitzvot and somehow fuse them. But I could not find any thinker who was able or willing to do this. L. Jacobs came the nearest to this ideal, but failed to satisfy me with his arrogant insistence on rationalisation. I then came across the works of A.J. Heschel and at last it seemed that

here was a mystic, highly intelligent committed Jew (at least in his books) who had effected a synthesis. His prose was particularly attractive to me. In a discussion about legalism and spirituality, he put the need for a synthesis very succinctly. He wrote: "The letter without the spirit is like a corpse. The spirit without the letter ~~is~~ is like a ghost."

Yet it seemed that in Yeshiva I was living in two worlds. I was somehow trying to participate in the activity of Talmud Torah, but I wanted simultaneously to have guidance how to develop the seeds of thought that thinkers like Heschel, Jung and Jacobs had planted in my very receptive mind. I felt that they had ~~do~~ so much potential and could be integrated within a Torah outlook. I saw that they made many things in Torah come alive and for the first time become truly relevant to the human situation.

74 Perhaps I should stress at this point that I think that the institution of East European Yeshiva has much to offer and I would urge any Jew to spend a few years there before embarking on his career. He will then have some Jewish knowledge and culture, which is so indispensable for serious discussion and creative thought. He will see sincerity, dedication and pursuit of spiritual values—a rare phenomenon today. I have no sympathy for those materialistic orthodox Jews who look down upon the Yeshiva boohur, the saint and the scholar. A Yeshiva is an oasis of sanctity and sanity in this mad secular world we live in. I am the first to take up the cudgels to defend the Makom Torah before the outside world.

Having said this, I confide to you that Gateshead Yeshiva failed to satisfy me—its staff refused or were unable to discuss my questions in depth. There did not seem to be an understanding, an ability to put themselves in my spiritual and mental shoes and see and feel things as I did and still do. They undoubtedly have Truth but were only able to expound it within a narrow term of reference. Perhaps for most people their approach is correct for it inspires them to lead the good life and, after all, this is really what matters. But for me it was inadequate, almost naive and superficial.

So I left Gateshead prematurely after 2 instead of my intended 3 years, depressed, disillusioned and mixed up. I took an office job until I came to myself and it lasted for 3 years. During this period I was not idle. I found that to answer my nagging spirit I must read widely, do research and dig for information and my interest was aroused in a host of subjects. The main topics that fascinated me were the history of ideas, sociology, depth psychology, eastern mysticism, comparative religion and Jewish philosophy. Of course, I couldn't go too deeply but I have found many helpful insights. It seemed that my interest revolved around man

Presume not G-d to scan; the correct study of mankind is man', but without the secular humanistic connotations. It is my basic conviction that from a true understanding of what man is and makes him tick, we can then really begin to understand what a Torah commitment is trying to achieve. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that one should keep Torah only for enlightened self interest, but rather that one should appreciate how deep into one's being Torah penetrates. This again is unclear. I am afraid I can't articulate this feeling very well.

Last year I had my first encounter with Lubavitch. I found in their highly developed philosophy much depth and there really is discussion on the concept of G-d and man, two problems that have constantly been with me. It is basically a 'Derch in Avodah' as opposed to a reasoned exposition on all aspects of the human predicament and thus is not fully comprehensive approach, but it is at least a step in the right direction. I can't fully subscribe to all Chabad's teachings, but try to see myself as an associate member of the movement hovering somewhere on the periphery! I am deeply impressed by their warmth, joie de vivre, music and friendliness and above all their humanity and concern for their fellow man that has become a byword throughout the Jewish world. In fact, I have found a Lubavicher chossid I can actually talk to candidly and without inhibition. He is a baal-teshuvah, like myself, who was studying medicine before he went to several Chabad Yeshivas. We meet weekly at his house and have discussions. He is deeply committed yet with an open mind and he has indeed widened my horizons within a Torah framework. But he is still young and inexperienced. One can't have everything, it seems, in this world.

And so to the present. Despite my past unrest and inner turmoil I am a strictly conforming Jew in practice. Obviously, there is sometimes tension between this attitude and an intense desire to be myself and free. But I feel I am progressing and slowly but surely removing the substantive doubt mood so that life becomes once more tolerable within a framework of Torah and Mitzvot. My solution has been to read widely as possible on several cognate subjects, discuss and reflect with someone who is fully committed ~~xxx~~ and who has his inspiration for Torah aus sich heraus, and lastly by living Torah. Participating in educational activities, davenning with kavannah and above all trying to learn Torah and trying to approach it as a spiritual exercise.

Now to the topic which I mentioned at the beginning of my letter. You seemed to emphasise in your article that the division of the world into secular

...and sacred is false. A Jew, you maintain, should utilise everything of beauty and value in this world for a higher purpose-spirituality; that every thing activity intellectual, spiritual and cultural should be integrated into a unity with the pursuit of Torah values; that one should not pursue the secular disciplines just as an excuse for making a livelihood, but as an integral part of a spiritual education.

I have just started at the London School of Economics to study law and social science. I heartily agree that the study of, say, the social sciences, can be directed to the lofty goal that you suggest. But I am also the leader of the L.S.E. orchestra and, if I am honest with myself, I can't really claim that this cultural activity of serious music making is in any way part of my religious life. It does not add to my understanding of G-d, Torah or life. It is an important part of my life and I get a kick out of it, besides being a wonderful relaxation and social activity. How can I attempt to utilise the time and effort spent in rehearsing a Beethoven symphony for the noble unity you so earnestly believe is possible? Would it not be better to do some social work or sit down and learn a blatt gemorrah?

Please forgive the length of this letter. I imagine you are very busy with many commitments. But this has been an opportunity to give expression to my thoughts and feelings in detail, something I rarely do. Please forgive me.

I would be extremely grateful if you could spare the time to write even a short reply. Failing this, I hope you will continue to write for 'Tradition' and continue to show in your most eloquent way that Torah is concerned to give both an intellectual and spiritual dimension to life. This reassurance is something that the modern sensitive Jew needs and only this approach can give genuine commitment meaning.

Yours Sincerely.

Michael Tabor.
