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Director of Special Projects

Dr. Norman Lamm
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New York, NY

Dear Rabbi Lamm:

This is my first opportunity to write you about your splendid lecture, on Jewish creativity, at the Fifth Avenue Synagogue. The elapsed time has, however, provided me some additional space to reflect on your thoughts, rather than to react immediately.

Let me say, at the outset, how great was the pleasure for me to be present at what was, in essence, really an old-fashioned Jewish exercise -- to witness the play of a subtle mind over ideas, and to observe the application of wide-ranging erudition to their development.

Such a refreshing and satisfying experience is all too rare today, outside the four walls of a yeshiva, and unfortunately even within the bounds of synagogues, where rabbis prefer (or are only qualified) to give current events lectures rather than a ,/r of one sort or another.

The subject is important enough -- indeed, crucial -- and the depth of your analysis serious enough to warrant my raising several basic questions about your approach and your conclusions.

First, your general philosophical assertion that creativity requires freedom, and its obverse -- that creativity cannot flourish under authoritarian rule.

2.

This is an attractive proposition; it has a certain esthetic intellectual appeal, especially to those of the democratic political persuasion. But history demonstrates it's a fallacy.

Take, for example, the case of Russia in the past two centuries, under both Tsarist autocracy and Bolshevik totalitarianism. One can make a very strong case that the greatest artistic -- or, literary -- creativity arose during that period.

Pushkin, at the beginning of that era; the plaiedes of Russian 19th century literature -- Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Gogol, Turgenev. In the Soviet period alone, the three greatest poets of the Russian language (after Pushkin) -- Osip Mandelstam, Boris Pasternak, Joseph Brodsky (all Jews, ironically enough, deracinated Jews, essentially) flourished under Stalinist murderousness and Brezhnevist brutishness. One could go on and on in this vein.

Or, for that matter, Jewish creativity under the Tsars. We are accustomed, quite rightly, to think of Russian Jewish life as a kind of vale of tears -- poverty, hunger, petty business and "crafts" -- in an atmosphere of blood libel, pogrom and Christian hatred.

And yet, and yet: This was the same era out of which sprang Mendele and Sholem Aleichem and Peretz, and Bialik and Ahad HaAm, and so many many others. The era, I surely need not tell you, when Yiddish became a literary language; when modern Hebrew evolved; when Zionism and the Bund were forged; when there was a plethora of Jewish literary and cultural creativity in Russian as well as in Hebrew and Yiddish.

And, again it is unnecessary for me to add, the wondrous renewal of Jewish religious thought and learning and practice, during the same era and the same area.

One can even note the very examples you cited in other contexts -- those of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiva. Did they not flourish, each in his own way, under harsh Roman regimes? True, Rabbi Akiva was put to death -- but not because of his teaching, but because of his politics (broadly defined).

I am put in mind of another context for a related thesis -- that put forward by my revered teacher, Leo Strauss, concerning the relationship of persecution and creativity. One need not agree with much of his interpretation to feel that there may well be some inherent connection between the two.

3.

These and so many other instances that could be cited bring me to my own hypothesis about the relation between conformity and creativity. I would put it this way:

There may be two forms of freedom: outer freedom and inner freedom. The former relates to political life; the latter, to the spiritual. And while the creative person may be outwardly enslaved or at least in utter conformity to the external forms of acquiescence, he may be utterly emancipated inwardly. Indeed, it might even be argued that oppression can frequently bring out the best in humankind.

To leave the strict examples of intellectual creativity for a moment, the Soviet experience has also shown us something about that aspect of human nature. Democratic dissidence was always there, however muted; but by the early 1960s it really began to take hold; by 1968, the sainted Sakharov had come into the fold, and then Solzhenitsyn, and so many other noble fighters.

True, in many instances the dissidence began because of censorship or other forms of repression of literary or scientific or intellectual expression. But what matters is that scores, then hundreds, then thousands rallied to the cause of free expression.

And now, with great historical irony, the former dissidents are floating around in a kind of moral/esthetic limbo: They have no more repressive regime to battle and their spiritual energies are somehow, if not paralyzed, then dissipated, unfocused. Human nature is funny, isn't it, and not to be confined too closely to rigid intellectual or analytic categories.

My next problem with your approach is that it is, I feel, altogether too a-historical, that it takes the analysis out of the historical context in which the actual persons lived and thought and taught, in which their ideas were expressed, received and reacted to or against.

I don't think it is valid to do that. It may be legitimate to learn gemara that way, and מ.קו"ל -- if, that is, one is seeking for an understanding of the actual מ.קו"ל and its applications. But even there, I would argue that a proper understanding of the evolution of מ.קו"ל would require a historical approach alongside that of traditional learning.

4.

Thus, whatever the flaws in Louis Finkelstein's pioneering study of the Pharisees, he did achieve one monumental task, and that was, to make it possible for many of us to see their great work in their historical context.

May I cite one among many kinds of examples of what I mean. You referred to the stringent opposition, even the ^{פ'ק'א} of the ^{פ'ק'א} against Hasidism -- something that was done on the basis of an understanding of ^{פ'ק'א}.

But, a historical point: Was not the fear of, and opposition to, Hasidism by the ^{פ'ק'א} deeply influenced by the historical experience of the devastation -- religious, moral, intellectual -- wreaked by both Frankism and Sabbateanism, both of which movements were in important respects precursors and influencers of Hasidism?

I put it to you that a historical approach is not the same at all as historicism. A historical approach, in fact, is essential for understanding and evaluating change. The "clear and logical mind" of the revered Rabbi Soloveichik does not and cannot function in a historical/cultural/intellectual/moral vacuum.

This leads me to my final question, directed at the most difficult of your concepts: the problem of ^{פ'ק'א} in ^{פ'ק'א} but not in the spiritual realm of Judaism (if I understood you correctly. If I may say so, the distinction you draw seems inadequately precise and demands further elucidation.

Is it really possible, intellectually, to make such a distinction? Are not ^{פ'ק'א} and the spiritual state so intertwined as to be inseparable, in Judaism, and if ^{פ'ק'א} is available for the one, must it not also penetrate the other?

You made it clear that by ^{פ'ק'א} you do not mean mere ^{פ'ק'א}. Then what?

You even went so far as to praise the "spontaneity and ecstasy" exhibited by an earlier, purer Hasidism (my adjectives, not yours). But this was, after all, ^{פ'ק'א} not in ^{פ'ק'א} but in the realm of the spirit, spiritual innovation, or "renovation," as Hasidism might have described it.

5.

And what, it could be asked, of the idea of Jewish spiritual renovation that would be required for the Jewish people once again to become an *am ha'olam* -- a moral conscience and spiritual guide for humanity? (We are surely unequipped for that role now....) What connection would such a nearly messianic development have with *mitzvot* and with Jewish creativity?

And finally, you will, I trust, forgive me for asking point blank: How does your approach differ, in essence and in principle, from the core of the Conservative philosophy adumbrated by Schechter and Finkelstein?

It seems to me that all this requires much more clarification. Indeed, you may already have supplied and I, in my ignorance, may be unaware of it. In any event, I would be grateful for your further enlightenment in these terribly interesting and terribly important issues.

I close as I began -- with thanks for stimulating me to think about things that I had left in desuetude for much too long.

With best wishes,

Sincerely,

