

Changing Jewish Communities

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Modern Orthodoxy and Its Future

An Interview with Rabbi Norman Lamm

- *Modern Orthodoxy is a form of Jewish Orthodoxy that is open to the outside world. It is characterized by five principles: its outlook on education, its stance toward Israel, its attitude toward the role of women, a mindset of inclusiveness, and a moderate mode of speaking and reacting.*
- *Modern Orthodoxy's way of thinking about Jewish education is governed by the concept of Torah UMadda (Torah and wisdom or culture). This includes both the relationship and the tension between Torah and Western civilization or secular knowledge.*
- *The number of women scholars of Talmud will increase further. These will become female role models for the next generation. Women will not, however, end up as Modern Orthodox rabbis, even if they may fulfill some of their functions.*
- *American Jewry has major problems. Although day schools are the only form of education that can help the future generations, they receive no financial support from the government. Another particularly critical issue is the family. With the exception of Ultra-Orthodoxy and Modern Orthodoxy, American Jews do not reproduce at replacement level.*

Rabbi Professor Norman Lamm is chancellor of Yeshiva University (YU). Previously he served twenty-seven years as president of the university. He defines Modern Orthodoxy as "a form of Jewish Orthodoxy that is open to the outside world. It is characterized by five principles: its outlook on education, its stance toward Israel, its attitude toward the role of women, a mindset of inclusiveness, and a moderate mode of speaking and reacting."

Torah UMadda

Lamm sums up Modern Orthodoxy's outlook: "Its way of thinking about Jewish education is governed by the concept of *Torah UMadda* [Torah and wisdom or culture]. This includes both the relationship and the tension between Torah and Western civilization or secular knowledge. YU was founded on this basic concept. In the first few years, when the Jewish migration from Eastern Europe to the United States increased, it could, however, still be seen as an old-time yeshiva.

"Later its leadership had to face a new kind of Jewish public, which was acculturating to the United States. A way had to be developed of dealing with it too. Thanks to the insistence of its students, YU became the flagship of the concept of *Torah UMadda*. This is still its logo today.

"The term itself goes back to 1910, when it was coined by Rabbi Yitzhak Yaakov Reines of Lithuania. It indicated then that Orthodox Jews should be interested in both Torah and general culture. Reines founded the Mizrahi [religious-Zionist] movement and also started a yeshiva in Lida, now in Belarus. Dr. Bernard Revel, the first head of YU, accepted this idea and it became part of YU's ideology."

The Full Impact of Western Civilization

Lamm explains: "When we say *Torah UMadda*, the term Torah means complete Jewish fealty to the Bible and to the Oral Law as it developed. Together with that comes a deep respect for and involvement in the culture of Western civilization. However, the philosophical and theological content of *Torah UMadda* remained somewhat inchoate and needed better elucidation. As students at YU, we were told that it was important to pursue both Jewish and secular studies and integrate them as best we could. This was not a fully adequate answer.

"When I became the university's president in 1976 I developed the *Torah UMadda* concept in more detail, explaining that it means confronting the full impact of Western civilization, history, philosophy, language, thought, and sociology - all from the vantage point of believing and informed Jews. In other words, the entire array of academic teachings has to be dealt with from a Torah perspective, accepting what is valuable, rejecting what is objectionable, and pondering all that is in between. This concept of *Torah UMadda* is accepted by the majority of both university teachers who are Orthodox and students at YU.

"At RIETS, the school of YU that prepares students for rabbinic ordination, there are nowadays more rabbinic faculty than before who are committed to this concept. In the past, many rabbis were teaching without really assenting to this most basic principle of Modern Orthodoxy. This has now improved. The others are more ambivalent than opposed to it."

The State of Israel

"Modern Orthodoxy has a highly positive attitude toward the State of Israel. Our Ultra-Orthodox brethren recognize only the Holy Land, but not the state. Most Modern Orthodox are religious Zionists. Despite all differences and nuances among us, we consider the founding of the State a historic change. We accept it as something that came from Providence.

"Yet, I am very wary - I acknowledge that I may well be in the minority of Modern Orthodoxy on this - of all current messianic elements. Without the belief in the coming of the Messiah, there is no possibility of hope for or confidence in the future. Yet, if it is taken to extremes, it can become dangerous like fire. One can live neither with it nor without it."

Lamm makes clear that he never approved of the messianic concept that impelled the Gush Emunim movement in its quest for Greater Israel. "It is very difficult to come to grips with the problems resulting from the fact that Israel is not a messianic state. Many Modern Orthodox people, after the Gaza disengagement in summer 2005, have problems that go very deep. Yet this crisis of Israeli religious Zionism will blow over with time. We are confronting issues that are much larger, such as the developments in the Muslim world.

"Not all Modern Orthodox Jews, at the present juncture, identify with what the Israeli government does. In Israel many religious Zionists strongly oppose the government because of the disengagement. Many at YU share their views. Others have a much more moderate perception. They are not leftists, but religious Zionists without the activist messianic element. It was like that in Rabbi Reines's days. I identify with that minority.

"I was critical of the Israeli government, however, for not being prepared for the move. One does not uproot thousands of people without planning in advance what will be done with them. This was a political and human error in which the government functioned poorly."

Students Fired with Enthusiasm

"As far as YU faculty and students are concerned, the love for Israel is very strong. Probably about three thousand of our graduates have settled in Israel. On average, every year 650 male and female students study in Israel for a minimum of one year.

"Most students have thoughts about emigrating to Israel. A significant number go on *aliyah*. We are proud of our Israel programs, which come at a considerable cost to the university. These students stay with us only for three years, and we give them credit for the fourth year in Israel. The university thus loses a quarter of its income from tuition - a significant amount.

"These returning students are fired with enthusiasm. Sometimes we have a problem of calming them down. They come back filled with great idealism, both religious and nationalistic, having spent a whole year of intensive studying while relating to Jewish matters only. Now they have to function 'normally' again and return to YU's regular dual program. This consists of Jewish studies, especially Talmud, from 9 a.m. to about 3 p.m.

"Thereafter, they have their secular studies - the full array of academic courses as in any university. A Jewish sociology professor at Princeton said to me a few decades ago: 'YU is the only remaining genuine Jesuit college in the United States.' It showed how impressed he was by the program's intensity."

Women Studying Talmud

"One major characteristic of Modern Orthodoxy's attitude toward women is that it allows them to be educated in the fullness of the Jewish tradition, including Talmud. Some important institutions in Israel have a similar position, such as Nishmat and Matan, both of which educate their students at a very high level, up to and including Talmud and its commentaries. Bar-Ilan University, too, offers advanced Jewish studies for women as well as men.

"Stern College for Women at YU has a graduate program for women in Talmud. It is beginning to flourish much more, as it has been active for several years. The number of women scholars in Talmud will increase further.

"They will also be teaching Talmud, and become role models for the next generation. As long as there were only male role models, it was hard to get this type of women's education started. For men, studying Talmud is a duty, so that not doing so makes one feel deficient. This is not the case for women.

"Women in Modern Orthodoxy will not end up as rabbis, nor is that the aim of the present women scholars. They are very modest and are studying because they believe in it, not to become famous, popular, or powerful. This is a very pure and noble approach. I think they will serve in a semi-Halakhic manner, very similar to the Halakhic [Jewish law] consultants in Israel who often act as buffers between the rabbinic authorities and the lay public, especially in areas where women may be reluctant to directly consult a male, as in the family-purity laws.

"Such reluctance is the result of commendable modesty, but it makes it more difficult for women to observe Halakha properly. Now that problem is being solved, especially in Israel, when learned women present the problems and their proposed solutions to scholarly rabbis."

Men and Women Scholars

When asked whether top women scholars will be equal in knowledge to male ones, Lamm answers: "I don't know if in twenty years they will be equivalent to the best among the male students. Under current conditions it is likely that men will remain more adept at Talmud study because they will have been engaged in it longer. They start learning Talmud when they are eight to ten years old.

"Women will come to Talmud study later, unless matters develop differently in elementary schools. Men have more time to devote to this learning than women, who generally get married at an age when their studies should be flourishing. We may not accept Freud's view that 'biology is destiny,' but we know this has a great deal to do with biology.

"When women bear children, they increase the Jewish population. This is part and parcel of what is so needed today. So there will always remain a gender gap, which will, however, not be that significant. Another result of women's scholarship will be more attention to the problem of *agunot* - women separated from their husbands who, for nefarious reasons, withhold a Jewish divorce thus leaving their former spouses in limbo and unable to remarry. Jewish women scholars will help show where the Halakha can prove helpful in such cases. And they will constitute both a silent and a public pressure on the *poskei* Halakha [rabbinic decisors] in the decades to come.

"Another question is whether women scholars will be as well accepted as the greatest Halakhic male scholars. That will take considerable time to answer. Beyond Halakha, tradition has its own value, impetus, and influence over the future as well as the past. Judaism had women prophets, but they never reached the level of Moses, Samuel, Isaiah. Why? It just so happened that they didn't.

"In some fields, as I mentioned, women will answer Halakhic questions under the supervision of qualified rabbinic judges. Female scholars in Nishmat, for instance, relegate important and legally complex questions to men who have vast experience. However, when the same question comes up two or three times, and the circumstances are identical, they know the answers sufficiently well to decide by themselves - provided they pass the test of competence, as would be true of young male scholars.

"For instance, in issues concerning matters such as menstruation, women scholars initially pass the problem to a male rabbi. After a while these women will know as much as many rabbis, because they specialize in the area. And women scholars will go into other fields too. This may be shocking to some men, but so be it."

Lamm sums up by saying this attitude sets Modern Orthodoxy apart from the Ultra-Orthodox. "That has one exception - the Lubavitch [Chabad] Hasidic movement, which permits women to study Torah."

Moderation

"Moderation, a fourth characteristic of Modern Orthodoxy, means that we do not always assume that ours is the only opinion that counts. Most of us are willing to engage in dialogue with other Jews. We remain convinced of the rightness of our convictions, but we respect the right of others to disagree. This is far from the Ultra-Orthodox position. We are also trying to train our students to behave in this way."

Lamm mentions that he was initially very much opposed to dialogue with Christians. "I was once facing a Reform lay group who 'dialogued' with Christians. I asked them: 'Do you really believe in this dialogue?' They knew in a primitive way what Christianity was about, but when I asked them about Judaism, they could not tell me, for instance, where the Ten Commandments were written in the Torah or name even a half-dozen of them. My five-year-old grandchildren knew more than that. These were the people representing Judaism!"

Interconfessional Dialogue

"YU is now involved in a limited but official way in interconfessional relations, albeit not in formal theological dialogue. At the request of the World Jewish Congress, we had two visits - each of about fifteen Catholic cardinals and bishops. Their greatest interest was to visit the *beit midrash* [study house] where our students study Talmud in their own particular way. This impressed them greatly.

"After the first group, a second group of cardinals and bishops came, consisting mainly of Indians, other Asians, and Africans. In both visits, a converted Jew, Jean Marie Lustiger, the former cardinal of Paris, was present. He said that he wanted his colleagues to know what Jews are. The first group came in all their finery and crosses. The second did not.

"Some cardinals asked the boys to explain what they were studying. One said to me: 'What a vast difference from our seminaries for the priests. There it is very quiet, everyone is reading. I have never seen so much energy and passion in learning as you have here.' They envied this.

"However, when we were asked to host a third group, we replied that we could not handle any more. Our students have to study too, and these are intrusive visits. They did, however, visit Stern College for Women, where the young women were studying Talmud in the *beit midrash*. All this could not have happened a few years earlier."

Inclusiveness

"Inclusiveness is the weakest of the characteristics of Modern Orthodoxy. We cannot however, leave almost everyone out of the Jewish fraternity, whether he is Reform, Conservative, or secular. Modern Orthodoxy has not held to this attitude all along, and many of us still do not. I advocate making Judaism as open as possible. Only those

who convert to another faith are excluded.

"I disagree with those who want to give automatic acceptance into a synagogue or a temple to a non-Jewish unconverted partner in a mixed marriage. I heard of one case, not long ago, where the rabbi did the bar mitzvah and the non-Jewish father was given the Torah to give to his son, as part of the Reform ritual. This should be both religiously and aesthetically repulsive. But other than that, we have got to care for every single Jew, and keep him or her within the Jewish family.

"When I was younger, I stormed against Conservative and Reform, but I no longer do so. We nowadays have so many external problems that we must try to keep every Jew within the fold. We should not rejoice when other movements such as the Conservatives have survival problems. Such an attitude will only result in a greater attrition of Judaism. It will not help us at all."

Outreach

"YU also has an outreach program - indeed, we were the first to do so, although we are not always given credit for it. We try to imbue our students with a sense of open-mindedness. Our top class is the Wexler *kollel elyon* [higher study group]. After four years of Talmud studies on a baccalaureate level, these students study Talmud and Codes for three years at the very highest levels and then four more years of studying for the rabbinate. We consider that they must be able to relate to the outside world, and not have a sense of being cloistered.

"Every second Thursday I meet with them and arrange for speakers who are far to the right or to the left of them religiously or politically. In this way, we hope, they will learn how to react and relate to others with different views. Our students ask sharp questions but remain respectful. As much as our students are impressed by the speakers, the reverse is also true.

"Outreach is not limited to the Jewish world. In an intersession in 2006, YU students traveled all over the globe. In Honduras, for instance, a group of young men and women from our college built a school in a town that had never seen a Jew before. This gave our students a sense of being involved with the world, as well as with our own people.

"Not only Jews in general, but also Modern Orthodoxy is experiencing a degree of acceptability in the United States that I could not have imagined when I was a child. Former vice-presidential candidate, Senator Joseph Lieberman, is an observant Jew. A similar situation could not have occurred a few decades ago. The U.S. ambassador to Israel until very recently, and before that to Egypt, Dr. Daniel Kurtzer, an observant Modern Orthodox Jew, was an undergraduate student at YU and later dean of the college."

Trends in Modern Orthodoxy

Lamm adds that "others in Modern Orthodoxy are moving more to the right. We used to have much closer relationships with the Orthodox Union, which has also moved somewhat in that direction. Young Israel is much more in the Aguda [Ultra-Orthodox] camp than it ever was. At this time no one person leads the Jewish people. Every slot in the spectrum of Judaism is filled by somebody. Modern Orthodoxy has a number of sub-branches, as do the Ultra-Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform movements."

Lamm notes that at YU's ordination ceremony in March 2006 in Jerusalem, the diversity of Modern Orthodoxy was manifested by the clothing of those who were ordained.

"Many graduates wore black hats. Some wore *peyot* [long side-locks] characteristic of Hasidic Jews. One came with a short-sleeved white shirt, a knitted skullcap, and no tie or jacket.

"One was dressed 'normally,' like me. He did not have *tsitsit* [the fringes ordained by the Torah for four-cornered clothing] hanging out - a sign of extra piety - and he wore no black kippa or hat. He is a pediatric oncologist who was getting ordination and at the same time teaching a course in bioethics. He lives in Israel and works in New York for a week, then comes back to Israel for three weeks. He is part of a group of doctors who rotate with each other. This is a new phenomenon.

"The future is unrolling before our eyes, whether we like it or not. We have internal debates about how to plan for it. The Orthodox Forum published some ten volumes on various subjects. We take a topic and discuss it on a truly high level. This works like a good think tank on various issues, such as history and Halakha, piety, the Jewish attitude toward war, Jewish education, and the role of women. Every year we organize a two-day conference with scholars from all over the world. These include women participants, which none of the Ultra-Orthodox groups would do."

The High Cost of Education

Lamm is not optimistic about many issues facing American Jewry. "A large part of it is disappearing through assimilation. Our Jewish strength politically, both for Israel and ourselves, will be weakened as our group in general gets smaller. American Jews put money into many good causes, yet American Jewry is in desperate trouble.

"Two matters are particularly critical for the American Jewish future: Jewish education and the Jewish family. We are doing poorly in both. We have a decreasing birthrate as we do not reproduce to keep up our numbers. Only Orthodox Jews, and in particular Ultra-Orthodox Jews, have relatively large families.

"As far as education is concerned, American Jewry has great problems. Day schools are the only form of education that can secure future generations. They are not perfect, yet we do not have financial support from the government for our day schools."

Cost of Education as a Contraceptive

"Someone pointed out that 'the high cost of Jewish education is the best contraceptive in the world.' Parents want to have more children but they feel they cannot because they are not able to support them with the proper kind of Jewish education. We face a crisis. If a parent earns \$100,000 and it costs about \$20,000 or more to send each child to school, then it is impossible to have large families.

"Such parents do not take economic luxuries that their earning level would ordinarily allow them. They do not take vacations that they would have been able to afford otherwise. They face choices like giving up on summer camps for their children, even if such camping is a 'Jewish experience.'

"There is no way to go cheap on education. Good education requires good teachers who have to be paid well. The Orthodox bear a very special burden. They cannot live anywhere they want. They have to have homes in neighborhoods within reach of a synagogue, a *mikveh* [ritual bath], and a school.

"A non-Orthodox Jew has to pay for his temple and the United Jewish Appeal. We have to pay for many other things, including kashruth, and give to the United Jewish Appeal as well. It is not that we boast about it, but it certainly reflects a high level of commitment."

Fighting for Government Funding

"It is easier for the Ultra-Orthodox to the extent that their teachers do not cost them so much. The children of the Modern Orthodox have access to all the attractive professions, including the liberal ones, Wall Street, and so on. Those who can get into a medical or law school are not likely to go into teaching.

"The Ultra-Orthodox, who barely went to high school and certainly not to college, are pushed into teaching, that is, unless they go into business, which not everybody can."

Lamm concludes: "What happens is that we, the religious, pay taxes for the education of our children and never use it. In the United States there is the separation of church and state. Whatever the constitutional problems, we have to fight those who are fanatic about maintaining it."

Interview by Manfred Gerstenfeld

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Rabbi Norman Lamm received three degrees from Yeshiva University: BA, PhD, and rabbinic ordination. After twenty-five years in the pulpit and twenty-seven years as president of Yeshiva University, he became the university's chancellor in 2003. He is

the author of ten books, some of which were translated into a number of languages.

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