

Memorial Tribute to Dr. Norman Lamm 57

Two Facets Of A Many-Faceted Diamond: In Memory Of Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm

By Rabbi Michael Broyde

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, *zt"l*, was a remarkably accomplished person. He was like a multifaceted diamond – he sparkled brilliantly from many angles and reflected light in many different ways. We as a community were deeply privileged to be led by such an extraordinary person. Reflecting on Rabbi Lamm's weighty legacy, I see at least four broad areas of accomplishment, each one almost unrelated to the other.

First, Rabbi Lamm was a prolific scholar. He was the author of numerous books in both English and Hebrew, as well as countless articles. Furthermore, his scholarship was impactful. From being cited by the United States Supreme Court to influencing contemporary halacha, Rabbi Lamm was strikingly diverse in his Torah scholarship. He published highly regarded articles in numerous different fields of Torah, which I will discuss in more detail below.

Second, Rabbi Lamm was a vibrant religious leader. He was, for many years, the rabbi of the Jewish Center in Manhattan, and he served as the president and *rosh yeshiva* of Yeshiva University. He guided countless Orthodox institutions through the rocky times from the late 1950s through the

2000s. At the same time, he shepherded numerous individual Jews around their own personal challenges. Additionally, he was a religious figure who served as an inspiring role model for how to synthesize the best of Torah and Western traditions in America in a practical way.

Third, Rabbi Lamm was a visionary institution builder and communal leader. He was the founding editor of *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* and was one of the founding forces and the first camp rabbi of Camp Morasha. As president of Yeshiva University, he created many new institutes, including various *kollelim* and programs. As a political leader of our community, he saw farther ahead than most – he pondered and weighed not only religious considerations, but also the social, political and economic implications of many different and difficult situations, as a true communal leader should. He provided the wise, nuanced practical guidance that our community sorely needed on so many occasions.

Fourth, Rabbi Lamm was a leading example of the intellectually nuanced thinker who sought to understand the many different sides of a complex issue – he was a role model of “intellectual centrism” in the very best ways. He was a person who stood in the center to better examine and understand the many different sides of a complex issue. He frequently and comfortably held the dialectic tension of navigating numerous conflicting yet valid views all at once. In the grandest rabbinic tradition of dispute resolution, Rabbi Lamm believed the greatest mitzvah was intellectual *pesharah* (compromise). This most admirable ideal was embodied by Rabbi Lamm on many levels, and he practiced both what he preached and what he believed in (more on this below).

Of course, Rabbi Lamm was much more than this: he was a wonderful father and husband, as his children have made abundantly clear, and he was a man of wonderful personal virtue, as I know first-hand. I

remarked to Rabbi Lamm once that my wife did not want to date me when I first asked her out; it took me a while to persuade her to date me and a while after that to persuade her that we should get married. (I remember the conversation well, as we were discussing hair covering and its connections to marriage.) Rabbi Lamm looked at me and told me that “Mrs. Lamm” (that is what he called her) did not want to



date him either when they first started dating; she only agreed to date him because her own mother told her that she “must” because their grandparents were friends. Rabbi Lamm then told me, “You should be as blessed in marriage as I was.” It was clear that he loved his wife Mindy, *a”h*, very deeply. Beyond being a great rabbi, Rabbi Lamm was a wonderful person to his core.

Allow me to focus on two facets of the diamond here: Rabbi Lamm, the spectacular scholar, and Rabbi Lamm, the grand intellectual peacemaker.

Given Rabbi Lamm's other important roles, one might make the terrible error of overlooking his significant scholarship. But he was, in fact, the author of more than twenty books and dozens of articles. Even more importantly, his articles addressed crucial issues of the times in distinctive and decisive ways. His article on confessions and halacha was cited by the United States Supreme Court in the groundbreaking and famous *Miranda* decision of 1966 as well as other decisions. His book on chasidut is, to this day, an authoritative standard volume.

His book on the great *mitnaged* Rabbi Chaim Volozhin and his influence plowed fertile ground in that field as well. He wrote the first article on ecology and halacha, and he authored a seminal work on the relationship between personal doubt and Orthodox practice. His book on *hilchot niddah* remains a widely read classic, and his work on privacy in the Jewish tradition is still widely cited and read. His explanation of the theology of Satmar remains the classical work for non-insiders who are curious to understand their community. Indeed, even his surprising discussion of “how would the existence of extra-terrestrial life impact Judaism” is still widely admired. The list goes on and on: Rabbi Lamm's book on *Shema* as a portal to Jewish theology and the connection between law and spir-

ituality is widely read by a diverse audience, and his book on *Torah Umadda* remains the definitive classic. To all this, we must add the magnificent *Derashot Ledorot*, a five-volume compendium of his wonderful weekly sermons as a pulpit rabbi as well as other volumes of holiday sermons he published.

Rabbi Lamm was an exceedingly rare communal leader, university president, and *rosh yeshiva*: he managed to remain an active scholar for his entire life while leading and making important and dynamic contributions to multiple fields for more than sixty years. That is one facet of his diamond.

The second facet is more complex to explain but was perhaps Rabbi Lamm's true source of inner strength, stature, and authority. Rabbi Lamm was prepared, indeed proud, to be an “intellectual diplomat” who sought to make peace between competing ideas. He recognized that when great minds advocated different approaches to a problem and many years passed without an outcome, the optimal resolution was one of intellectual compromise – creating synthesis between these competing views rather than trying to determine which single view was truly “correct.” We live today in an era of intellectual rigidity and leaders playing to their base, but this was not Rabbi Lamm. He undertook to realize a much grander vision: to synthesize competing truths. Indeed, his work on the relation-

Continued on p.41

A Brief, Unpublished Teshuvah From Rabbi Norman Lamm

By Rabbi Michael J. Broyde

In April 1995, Rabbi Norman Lamm, *zt"l*, penned this brief *teshuvah* about the practice of playing live music on Israel's Independence Day at Yeshiva University to us at the Young Israel of Toco Hills in Atlanta, then a fledgling Modern Orthodox synagogue that opened its doors the previous fall. I was rabbi of the Young Israel at the time, and we were preparing to celebrate Israel's Independence Day with live music, contrary to the practice of the other Orthodox synagogues in the area. There was considerable lay and rabbinic opposition in Atlanta to introducing live music during *Sefirah*, and I sought written support from my teachers and *rabbayim* to validate the *minhagim* of our new community. Rabbi Lamm responded on RIETS stationery clearly and directly with a recitation of the longstanding practice of YU in this area. I have reproduced his text and my translation below.

Let me add a word about Rabbi Lamm's Zionism:

Continued on p.41