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THE EXTREMES ARE MORE CONSISTENT BUT ABSURD

Essays on Centrist and Modern Orthodoxy, *Seventy Faces*, vol. 1, chapters 3–5

“Of course [insects] answer to their names?” the Gnat remarked carelessly.

“I never knew them do it.”

“What’s the use of their having names,” the Gnat said, “if they won’t answer to them?”

“No use to *them*,” said Alice; “but it’s useful to the people that name them, I suppose. If not, why do things have names at all?”

“I can’t say,” the Gnat replied.

—*Through the Looking Glass*

Rabbi Norman Lamm is the figure most closely associated with Modern Orthodoxy. No other writer or orator engaged with the values of the movement—prescriptively or descriptively—more than he. As one of American Orthodoxy’s leading intellectuals for the first half of his career, and as the leader of Modern Orthodoxy’s flagship institution throughout the second half, it could hardly have been otherwise. Surveying his speeches and writings on the subject over those many remarkable decades, we witness repeated and sustained engagement with defining the form and substance of the community he nobly led, albeit with variations on themes and evolution in points of focus (although never wavering in his primary commitments and concerns). And yet, R. Lamm expressed some discomfort and ambivalence about the nomenclature of the community he would come to be so closely identified with, admitting at one point that he uses the name Modern Orthodox “only with the greatest hesitation.” In 1969 he confessed to being

uncomfortable with the title “Modern Orthodox.” There is an arrogance about this assertion of modernity which should give offense to any

intelligent and sensitive man. There is no better term that I have found, but I flinch when I articulate the words.¹

Before he would come to fully articulate his vision for an “ought,” he was critical of the sociological “is” of the religious movement. On the night of *Kol Nidre* 1972 he spoke to the packed pews of The Jewish Center and declared:

Now, it is no secret that I identify with what is called “Modern Orthodox Judaism.” I have written about it, I advocate it, I defend it, I preach it. But to you, my friends who are within this camp of Modern Orthodoxy, I confess my worries. I am troubled by our emotional thinness and spiritual tinniness. There is, for instance, something wrong with our prayers: the lips move, and the heart remains cold. We join in the singing perhaps, but what of the davenning? What of those times when each individual closes his eyes and pours out his soul before God?²

Much of his concern emanates from the balkanization of the Jewish community into different sub-groups, and of Orthodoxy gerrymandered into sociological groupings that imprecisely correspond to ideological, theological, and halakhic commitments. Perhaps “Modern Orthodoxy” was inaptly named to begin with, leading to what he would come to term an “ideological identity crisis”—a movement serving as a blank screen on which both adherents and opponents could project any image they wished. Confused and multiple meanings resulted. Throughout much of its earliest period the term could be stretched to encompass widely disparate behaviors and beliefs (in earlier decades “modern Orthodoxy” was synonymous with what we today call Conservative Judaism). As a community it was a descriptive title in search of content and it struggled to accurately define itself. This is, perhaps, a story applicable to various religious groups. After all, communities often do not choose their own appellations; not infrequently the names are applied by outsiders, even by opponents.

The descriptor “modern” originated in a mid-nineteenth-century Reform critique of Orthodoxy. The first self-identified Modern Orthodox person to lay claim to the name was the founder of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations (today the Orthodox Union), the Rev. Henry Pereira Mendes, around 1898. By 1940 Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein eschewed the use of the term “Orthodox,” reminding his followers that “it is singularly strange that the oldest branch of Judaism and the one nearest its ancient source bears a name which is not of Jewish connotation. The term ‘orthodox’ is generally used in Christian theology to designate the original Church as distinct from its various and eventual reformations.”³

TRADITION

Other adjectives were considered more authentic and accurate: Torah-true Judaism, Traditional, or even Historical Judaism.

In R. Lamm's younger days, before his elevation to the presidency of Yeshiva University, where he would be attacked from both right and left as the standard-bearer of the movement, he often sounded somewhat like a traditionalist critic of Modern Orthodoxy. In a sermon for Hanukka 1968 he told his congregants that a troubling aspect of their community is the problem of forgetting the centrality of Torah study: "the vital center of our own lives is Torah, we cannot and dare not get along without some element of the over-all community that is totally and exclusively committed to the study of Torah and Torah alone." While he comes down in conclusion that "the Orthodox community must not be monolithic but pluralistic, that it must contain elements that are both modernist and purist," he is in fact arguing for elements of Haredism as a model for Modern Orthodoxy. "Because of our modernist Orthodox involvement in the secular world, because we walk on this dangerous borderline between two worlds, we sometimes tend to lose our balance and to distort our perspective."⁴

Two years earlier, in sketching ideas that would later become central to his thought, R. Lamm struck an alternative note when considering those who withdraw from the world, even while rebuking those who lack proper affinity for the Torah-only camp. He notes with caution the dangers of "the other side of the coin":

I have spoken several times in the last few weeks on what I consider is and should be the philosophy of modern Orthodoxy: a total commitment to the Halakhah while living in this world and participating in it fully—culturally, economically, and politically. We spoke critically, even if warmly and lovingly, of a new tendency noticeable in Orthodoxy in recent years to recoil, to recede from the larger community and ignore all those whose interests do not coincide with ours. Our thesis says that this withdrawal from the world, this refusal to confront contemporary life, is not a viable philosophy for Orthodox Judaism in our times. I believe that this is a theme that needs constant reiteration, continuous consideration, and deep reflection. Today, however, I wish to emphasize the other side of the coin: the caution that we must exercise never to lose ourselves in the world, not to be overly impressed with the great culture in which we live.⁵

Ultimately these cautionary tones about sacrificing the balance between modernity and Orthodoxy, at a cost to our primary commitments to Torah, while sincerely held and deeply felt, did not lead him to some kind of

reactionary bias. Long before he developed the language and models so familiar to us now from his extended engagement with *Torah u-Madda*, he argued for balance. Influenced, no doubt, by the confidence and boldness of his mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, he telegraphed to his audience a sense that faith, if ardently earned, has nothing to fear from modernity if equilibrium can be achieved and maintained. If not, imbalance will lead to the detriment of both Judaism and general culture:

Modern Orthodoxy, despite all its profound problems and well-advertised inadequacies, can successfully hold onto both worlds with firmness, integrity and dignity—and retain both too! One can be truly pious, in the tradition of Halakhah and Torah, and still be oriented to the future. There is no unresolvable conflict between them. Those who would remove one from the other... offend the deepest tenets of our faith. If Torah has no relevance for 1963, then its claims are fraudulent and 35 centuries of Jewish history are a tragic failure. Torah withdrawn from all of contemporary life into its own little cubicles... threatens to become nothing more than a quaint museum piece revered by a few eccentric sectarians, no matter how genuine their loyalties to Torah. And, far worse, modern life unblessed by Torah, undirected by Halakhah, unjudged by Mussar, has already shown that it becomes a jungle, and its inhabitants—beasts and cannibals.⁶

The problem, of course, identified early on by R. Lamm, was that too many would-be devotees of Modern Orthodoxy gave the impression that it is a “pareve” form of *frumkeit* instead of an ennobling synthesis. He earnestly countered this “is not a case of ideological wimpishness” (63). “The main idea is that Torah must be embraced together with that which is noblest and most compatible in the prevalent culture, and that the Jew, totally committed to Torah, must utilize his spiritual powers to inhere in Torah in order to fructify and sanctify all the rest of human endeavor... Whereas we in fact accept this ideology... we have been too apologetic in explaining and interpreting ourselves to the outside world.”⁷ This shortcoming may be a sign of Modern Orthodoxy’s “youthfulness as an ideological movement”:

Merely to describe what we are is not a sufficiently convincing reason for being what we are or for persuading others to acknowledge our rightness and join our ranks. The great problem of modern American Orthodoxy is that it has failed to interpret itself to itself. This failure, which reveals itself in many ways, derives from a remarkable, intellectual timidity which we should have long outgrown (35).⁸

TRADITION

He endeavored to unapologetically explain and interpret what he set out to do. Again, foreshadowing ideas which would become central to his *Torah u-Madda* initiatives starting in the mid- to late-1980s, he defined the ultimate task and challenge of the movement as “resolv[ing] the central dilemma of the tension between our ‘two worlds,’” cautioning that “a transcendental theological schizophrenia is no virtue” (38, 36).

Four years earlier, in the pages of this journal, founded by R. Lamm, the Rav had introduced our readers to the character of Adam II, the “lonely man of faith,” and articulated the dialectical tension between the two worlds we as Modern Orthodox Jews are not merely challenged but obliged to occupy:

Let us not forget that the majestic community is willed by God as much as the covenantal faith community. He wants man to engage in the pursuit of majesty-dignity as well as redemptiveness. He summoned man to retreat from peripheral, hard-won positions of vantage and power to the center of the faith experience. He also commanded man to advance from the covenantal center to the cosmic periphery and recapture the positions he gave up a while ago. He authorized man to quest for “sovereignty”; He also told man to surrender and be totally committed. ...

If one would inquire of me about the teleology of the Halakhah, I would tell him that it manifests itself exactly in the paradoxical yet magnificent dialectic which underlies the Halakhic gesture. When man gives himself to the covenantal community, the Halakhah reminds him that he is also wanted and needed in another community, the cosmic-majestic, and when it comes across man while he is involved in the creative enterprise of the majestic community, it does not let him forget that he is a covenantal being who will never find self-fulfillment outside of the covenant and that God awaits his return to the covenantal community.⁹

We hear echoes of “The Lonely Man of Faith,” and sense the Rav’s guiding influence, when R. Lamm writes, “The basis of our major contribution to Jewish life in this century: that it is our *religious* duty, our *sacred* responsibility, to live the whole Torah tradition *in the world*, instead of retreating from a world in which there is literally no longer any place left to retreat” (36).

In 1976, R. Lamm’s role as one of the movement’s non-apologetic explainers and interpreters was dramatically transformed. For a dozen or so

years he had been speaking about the form and content of Modern Orthodoxy's ideas, ideals, and vision from his perch as a community rabbi, rising public intellectual, journal editor, and writer. Upon assuming the presidency of Yeshiva University alongside his leadership of its Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, he became identified as the movement's institutional leader. This role was significantly intensified less than a decade later with the Rav's illness and absence from the public stage.

It should be noted that R. Lamm assumed his place as a thought leader while burdened with the awesome administrative, institutional, and financial responsibilities of leading Yeshiva during very challenging times. There are very few parallels or precedents in higher education for one person filling all these roles within a university and *ipso facto* functioning as an intellectual leader of an international religious community. The fact that R. Lamm did so, and successfully, is even more remarkable when we consider that on average university presidents, almost all of whom occupy a less complex constellation of roles, serve for a mere fraction of the quarter-century he stood at the helm of Yeshiva.¹⁰

During these years he began to speak more stridently of the ideological commitments of a Modern Orthodox Jew. He moved beyond descriptions of who we are and began to focus instead on what we ought to be. Among the major themes and characteristics that repeat themselves in his writing, *Ahavat Yisrael* stands out. Our obligation to love and seek the betterment of Jews worldwide and across denominations was an obligation of very high order to R. Lamm. He made it clear that this was no abstract philosophical commitment but a normative moral imperative. By extension he "included in the rubric of the centrality of the people of Israel as a fundamental distinguishing tenet of Centrist Orthodoxy is the high significance of the State of Israel" (52).

But, perhaps, above all, R. Lamm presented moderationism as the first among equal characteristics of Modern Orthodoxy. He pointed to a 1954 address delivered by R. Soloveitchik at a convention of the Rabbinical Council of America in Detroit and built on the ideas presented there. On that occasion, the Rav explained that Maimonides' "Golden Path" in personality traits, outlined in his *Hilkhot De'ot* and *Shemona Perakim*, is not a mathematical mean. Rather, Maimonides' approach is "far more subtle and dynamic: he favors the ability to go from one end to the other of the spectrum as necessity requires it, so that in sum and on average we stay in the center, but not that we remain unalterably and unerringly glued to one mid-point" (56). For Maimonides, and by extension the Rav and R. Lamm, "the key to character... is not the mean as such, but the weighing and measuring and directing, the conscious use of reason rather

TRADITION

than passively following nature blindly and supinely. In other words, the process of arriving at a determination of one's own life and character is more important than the results" (57). The deliberative process, for R. Lamm, was essential, almost as important as the end result. The absence of such deliberation would result in warped and perverted conclusions with the benefit of "this 'weighing and measuring' and consideration of all viewpoints before deciding." He saw the ability to navigate the Maimonidean path as "the halakhic implementation of moderationsim. It used to be the accepted hall-mark of a *posek* who was a *gadol*. Our hapless generation can no longer be so certain that its contemporary *poskim* follow that Maimonidean ideal" (61).¹¹ While R. Lamm reminded us that moderation is not a "mindless application of arithmetic averages," he understood why some were tempted by that easier path of an imagined calculator crunching the numbers and pointing toward a position or *pesak*. With no small degree of frustration, he often quoted the insight of Nicholas Murray Butler, "The extremes are more logical and more consistent—but they are absurd."¹²

With a desire to transcend the absurdities, and to put more emphasis on ideological content rather than sociological description, R. Lamm spearheaded the "rebranding" of Modern Orthodoxy, advocating Centrist Orthodoxy in its place. In 1986 he wrote in these pages:

We seem to be suffering from a terminological identity crisis. We now call ourselves "Centrist Orthodoxy." There was a time, not too long ago, when we referred to ourselves as "Modern Orthodox." Others tell us that we should call ourselves simply "Orthodox," without any qualifiers, and leave it to the other Orthodox groups to conjure up adjectives for themselves. I agree with the last view in principle, but shall defer to the advocates of "Centrist Orthodoxy" for two reasons: First, it is a waste of intellectual effort and precious time to argue about titles when there are so many truly significant issues that clamor for our attention. In no way should the choice of one adjective over the other be invested with any substantive significance or assumed to be a "signal" of ideological position (41).

This came at precisely the moment, coinciding with Yeshiva's centenary celebrations, that he turned his attention to *Torah u-Madda* as an organizing ideological principle.

For those of us in the centrist camp, Torah Umadda does not imply the coequality of the two poles. Torah remains the unchallenged and pre-eminent center of our lives, our community, our value system. But centrality is not the same as exclusivity. It does not imply the rejection of all

other forms or sources of knowledge, such that non-sacred learning constitutes a transgression. It does not yield the astounding conclusion that ignorance of Wisdom becomes a virtue (46).¹³

Interestingly, in these first forays into the arena of *Torah u-Madda* there is little explanation for why *Madda* is a value, and how it should be partnered, integrated, or synthesized with Torah. Those discussions would find their proper home in his *Torah Umadda: The Encounter of Religious Learning and Worldly Knowledge in the Jewish Tradition* (1990).

Ultimately, the attempt to refocus the communal conversation with a name change proved ill-fated. The masses misunderstood, assuming “centrism” to be what it sounds like—the mathematical average decried by Maimonides and the Rav. As a “marketing strategy” this may have been an overreach. Good branding requires us to “keep it simple”; never take for granted that the masses are engaged with the finer points of the Rav’s analysis of *Hilkhot De’ot*. “Centrism” as a slogan was misunderstood and critiqued from both the right and the left (R. Lamm called himself “an equal opportunity target”).

By the late 1980s R. Lamm was being pilloried for his advocacy of these values from the mouthpieces of the Agudath Israel, and even, in a more muted fashion, from within more traditionalist corners of YU itself. On Passover 1988 the venerable Telz Rosh Yeshiva, R. Mordechai Gifter, targeted R. Lamm in a speech that came to be known as “Gifter Slaughters Lamm for Passover.”¹⁴ At the same time, the Agudah’s right-wing magazine *The Jewish Observer* ran two columns penned by Prof. Aaron D. Twerski, attacking R. Lamm’s centrism for “giving the appearance of dealing with Conservative and Reform leaders with deference and dignity.”¹⁵ A few years earlier an unsigned editorial in that same publication cynically required a true centrist to “be equally accommodating to both extremes, or equally negative toward them both.”¹⁶

From the left, the right’s ability to land such blows on Centrist Orthodoxy’s leader was itself a sign that the movement was lacking vigor. Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg wrote:

Unfortunately, the great spiritual leader of modern Orthodoxy, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, is ill and out of the picture. Lamm is now the leading figure of modern Orthodoxy in America, but the very fact that he had to respond to the Twerski critique himself—and was further savaged in the reply—gives some inkling of the powerful intimidation factor now operating in the Orthodox community.¹⁷

TRADITION

In a problematic sociological study of centrism, two reputable scholars even questioned the existence of the movement R. Lamm purported to lead as a definable, stable religious community:

Strictly speaking we cannot even call [centrists] a group for they are by nature a conglomeration of people in the middle facing both directions and pulling toward opposite extremes. Among themselves the centrist tending toward traditionalism and the one closer to nominal Orthodoxy look upon each other as far apart. Thus, centrists are rather an aggregate of the ambivalent, a mass of people not completely aligned with traditionalism nor wholly in favor of settling for an Orthodoxy in name only.¹⁸

There can be no doubt that these attacks stung. They were at best a distraction and at worst undermined in subtle ways the important work R. Lamm had undertaken. He may have been thinking as much about himself as he was about the great twelfth-century moderate when he observed, “It is ironic that Maimonides himself was the object of extremism on the historic polemic” (59)!

By career’s end, R. Lamm reassessed. Writing in 2002, introducing the section of *Seventy Faces*, which gathers his writings on these topics, he stated:

For a while, I rejected the title [Modern Orthodox] because I considered the adjective “modern” as objectionable; it appeared as if we were boasting of our modernity when, indeed, we were hardly uncritical of it even though we stand for engaging it openly and forthrightly. I therefore introduced the term “Centrist” Orthodoxy, intending not a mathematical mean between two extremes, but those who follow Maimonides’ principle of moderation.... However this did not prove to be an inspired decision; most people assumed it meant we were situating ourselves mid-way between reform and the Satmarer group. Nothing, of course, could be more wrong-headed. I have therefore reverted to the term Modern Orthodoxy (1).

But the attacks did not only lead to a terminological reversion. R. Lamm took his knocks and channeled his energy into thickening the engagement with *Torah u-Madda* as a communal-wide conversation, reaching beyond the halls of Yeshiva, to have Modern Orthodoxy take stock of itself. By the late 1980s he was focused on the “safer” intellectual realm of the movement’s commitments, particularly *Torah u-Madda*, rather than engaging in turf-wars with his opponents.¹⁹ *Torah u-Madda* allowed him to engage instead with ideas, always his first preference, rather than

denominations and sociological division-making, which would have painted him into a suffocating ideological box (something to which he was temperamentally allergic).

Early in his career R. Lamm outlined the challenge facing anyone aspiring to a role in the intellectual leadership of our movement: “To formulate the world-view of modern Orthodoxy in a manner that is halakhically legitimate, philosophically persuasive, religiously inspiring, and personally convincing” (36). He understood better than most that discussing a community sociologically or descriptively will only get one so far—even a gnat who knows his own name is still just a gnat. If we are to be authentic, proud, sincere Modern or Centrist Orthodox Jews, he told us over the course of many decades, let’s get on with it already. What’s needed, to borrow R. Moshe Besdin’s well-worn phrase, is “It, not about it.” R. Norman Lamm first unapologetically explained and interpreted Modern Orthodoxy to itself. Then, through his energetic leadership in thought and action, he showed his intellectual, spiritual, and religious community how to fill that form with substance and meaning.²⁰

¹ “The Arrogance of Modernism,” sermon for Shavuot 5729 (May 23, 1969).

² “Come Home,” sermon for *Kol Nidre* 5733 (September 17, 1972).

³ Cited in Zev Eleff, *Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History* (JPS, 2016), 149. Eleff’s source anthology, with his keen commentary, is an invaluable resource for anyone interested in the larger set of issues discussed here, tracked over multiple generations. I am grateful to Zev for his advice and friendship, which informed much of what I wrote in this essay.

⁴ “The Purists,” sermon for Hanukka 5729 (December 14, 1968).

⁵ “Upstream,” sermon for *Beha’alotkha* (June 4, 1966).

⁶ “Religion with a Future,” sermon for *Vayigash* 5723 (January 5, 1963). This sense of self-confidence is but one example of the Rav’s not fully explored influence on R. Lamm’s development of our community’s philosophy (others are alluded to below).

⁷ “The Purists” (1968).

⁸ These comments about his distaste for apologetics, first published in 1969, are among his earliest response to attacks from the right. He goes on to bemoan the fact that Modern Orthodoxy is “apologetic—almost masochistically—towards those to the right of us.... [In our embrace of secular learning and culture] we present the lamest of all apologetics: vocational necessity!” (36).

⁹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “The Lonely Man of Faith,” *TRADITION* 7:2 (1965), 49–51. To be clear, the Rav never used the phrase “Modern Orthodox” in any meaningful way, and in his iconoclastic manner never self-identified with the movement of which he remains the unparalleled standard-bearer. Nevertheless, no thinking, spiritually attuned, self-identifying member of the community can read “The Lonely Man of Faith” and not see it as a manifesto of our ideals.

¹⁰ Mitchell Langbert, “The Tenure of Private College and University Presidents,” *Journal of Academic Administration in Higher Education* 8:2 (Fall 2012), 1–20. Interestingly, Langbert shows that “closely matched religious background” between a president and his university tends to increase his duration in the job.

¹¹ For more on the Rav’s 1954 address see Walter S. Wurzbarger, “Alienation and Exile,” *TRADITION* 6:2 (1964), 42–52 (esp. in text at and surrounding fn. 18); reprinted in Wurzbarger, *Covenantal Imperatives* (Urim, 2008), 229–238. See also Reuven Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility: The Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Urim, 2012), 53–54.

¹² Despite my earlier observation of R. Lamm occupying an almost unprecedented and unparalleled constellation of roles as a university president and figure on the public stage, anyone who familiarizes himself with the life of Nicholas Murray Butler (1862–1947), who served as president of Columbia for 43 years, will understand why R. Lamm may have looked to him with respect and affinity.

¹³ In these matters R. Lamm often drew his community’s attention to the model of Rav Kook: “Ultimately, as Rav Kook taught, both the sacred and the profane are profoundly interrelated” (46). It should be noted that, although not the first in America to engage with his thought, R. Lamm was an early devotee, and recognized the significance of Rav Kook’s writing for Jewish modernism of all varieties. See his small book, *Rav Kook: Man of Faith and Vision* (Youth and Education Department and Jewish National Fund, 1965), and chapter 6 of *Torah Umadda*.

¹⁴ Eleff, *Modern Orthodox Judaism*, 355–358; a video of R. Gifter’s speech can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/BXRZfSnxL9k>.

¹⁵ Aaron D. Twerski, “An Open Letter to Dr. Norman Lamm,” *The Jewish Observer* (April 1988), 6–9. Lamm responded in “An Open Reply to Professor Aaron Twerski,” *The Jewish Observer* (June 1988), 13–16, which was followed in the same issue by Twerski’s 10-page “rejoinder.”

¹⁶ “Centrist: Between the ‘Right Wing’ and Whom?,” *The Jewish Observer* (April 1984), 34.

¹⁷ Irving Greenberg, “Fighting for the Soul of Orthodoxy,” *The Jewish Week* (July 13, 1990), 20.

¹⁸ Samuel C. Heilman and Steven M. Cohen, *Cosmopolitans and Parochials: Modern Orthodox Jews in America* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), 210. See the take-down review of this methodologically problematic book by David Berger, “Modern Orthodoxy in the United States: A Review Essay,” *Modern Judaism* 11 (1991), 261–272.

¹⁹ This observation was suggested by Eleff, *Modern Orthodox Judaism*, 396, see also 348–350.

²⁰ It should be observed that among the generally accepted values of Modern Orthodoxy, which Rabbi Lamm largely overlooked as a philosophical-intellectual subject if not in practice, is the status and role of women in Judaism. Only very late in his career did he begin to address the subject, and then specifically regarding equal educational opportunities, rather than leadership roles. When he does so, he treats the issue as a freestanding topic rather than as a feature of Modern Orthodoxy’s ideals *per se*. See the essay by Rabbanit Chana Henkin elsewhere in this volume.